

26 MAY 2024

The Observer Magazine

Five-star rating:
how would you score
your life so far?
'For me, there's a
link between makeup
and mental health'
Nigel Slater's
crisp and crumbly
summer baking

'Politicians?

They're mugs,

all of them'

At 66, Paul Weller has lost none of his edge.

The modfather

talks music, style – and the state of the nation



66

PAUL WELLER

66

**THE NEW ALBUM
OUT NOW**



The Observer Magazine



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Miranda Sawyer is a journalist, broadcaster and author. She is also the *Observer's* audio critic, covering radio, music and podcasts.



This week, she meets Paul Weller for our cover story – and wonders how he's kept it so cool for more than four decades (p10).



Award-winning photographer/filmmaker

Dean Chalkley recalls how, as a teenager, it was the Mod scene that captured his imagination and through it he developed a love for soul and jazz. It was The Jam's concert at Southend-on-Sea that is his all-time favourite gig – rather fittingly as he shot Paul Weller for this week's magazine (p10).



Joel Snape has spent years listening to music while he works out, from Metallica during squats to post-rock on long runs. For his feature this week, he spoke to the researchers investigating how tempo, rhythm and even lyrics affect our bodies and brains while working up a sweat – and he hasn't forgotten to charge his headphones ever since (p36).



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Cover image Dean Chalkley

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Eva Wiseman

Pillows, playlists and a gentle push... My birth plan was a joke



@evawiseman



From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

'How bright are the British?' the *Observer* asked on 17 September 1989, turning quizmaster to ask the nation a set of 'easy' general knowledge questions, then reporting back on the results, sliced and diced for demographics.

The questions spanned basic arithmetic, culture, geography, history and more. Although none would trouble a *University Challenge* team, seven of the 2,275 adults who took part got all of them wrong. Only 30 managed a perfect 100%. Scotland was the worst-performing region. North London beat south London and the Greens did better than voters for other parties. Private and state school classes of 12-year-olds pitted against each other resulted in a 'narrow win' for private. Women fared worse than men (several female academics declined to take the test), possibly because: 'They are too busy holding down a job, mothering, wifeing and doing the housework to acquire general knowledge.'

The magazine tried to persuade a selection of celebrities to give it a go, offering £10 to charity for each right answer, but many (including Vinnie Jones, Peter Stringfellow and Michael Grade) proved elusive.

Lady Antonia Fraser struggled with EC member states and the boiling point of water ('I haven't the foggiest. Is it really? Gosh.') Ken Livingstone couldn't manage 7x6 – 'Oh, God, I can't remember, I do everything with a calculator' – but was untroubled. 'I failed every exam I sat at school and it hasn't done any harm to me in life.'

The question that defeated most participants – celebrity and civilian – was 'Who was the father of Cain and Abel?' which only 23% answered correctly. It tripped up the then-chancellor of Oxford University, Roy Jenkins, radio quiz host Robert Robinson, the leader of the Inner London Education Authority and even briefly stumped Jeffrey Archer, author of... *Kane and Abel*. **Emma Beddington**

Oh God, I mean, I laugh about it now. Which is funny in itself really, the idea that 10 years later I'd be laughing about the day, the dawn, where, white-faced in a room with blood up the walls, I would hand our new raw blinking baby to my boyfriend in order to frantically find, in my Notes app, the document I had grandly named Birth Plan. What was I hoping to find there, I wonder now. It's funny, it is funny, how I scoured it – "I want a mobile epidural", "I want gentle guidance rather as opposed to being forced to push" – this plan, written as if ticking off boxes on a dim sum menu, written in the voice of the person I was before. It seemed crucial, in that moment, to see if perhaps I'd given them the wrong piece of paper. Had it been an admin error? The forceps, the lack of drugs, the breast milk not coming in, the blood, was it my fault? I remember reading it again and again, I hadn't slept for some time, of course, and the baby was crying, but I felt, I think I felt, that even though I had tried to do everything right, something had gone terribly wrong.

It turned out, despite my shock, despite the horrors and their ripples that followed me for years, my experience of giving birth was almost comically pedestrian. It reminded me of the time I got my ears pierced, I must have been about 12, going home on the bus looking at other women's earrings and thinking, "OK, you've felt that same agony" – now I traipsed around London with the baby strapped to me looking at other mothers, thinking, "and yet, you are walking, you are smiling, you are putting on red lipstick in the reflection of a phone?" As the years have passed I've talked to other people about their births with a kind of hunger – these are stories of babies almost dying and mothers almost dying, and worse, of course – so when last week's report on birth trauma was published, no part of me was surprised at the findings. I can't imagine many parents were.

It's estimated that 30,000 women a year in the UK have suffered negative experiences during the delivery of their babies, with one in 20 developing PTSD, at least in part because of the government's austerity measures. The report put forward 12 recommendations in total, including: recruit, train and retain more midwives, obstetricians and anaesthetists to ensure safe levels of staffing; respect mothers' choices around giving birth and access to pain relief; commit to tackling inequalities in maternity care for ethnic minorities; and universal access to specialist maternal mental health services.

I wondered often, in those hot white months following my daughter's birth, whether alongside my birth plan, it would have helped me process the shock if we had also been encouraged to consider a plan B, and C, and maybe D. Instead, we compiled long lists of "essential" items to take to hospital – drinking straws, protein bars, aromatherapy. We heaved an Ikea bag of pillows and tiny T-shirts into a cab, then across the car park and up in the lift and it remained in the corner of the maternity ward for the next long week. The report calls for a system "where poor care is the exception rather

than the rule", which, honestly, threw me a bit, because surely eliminating poor care altogether should be the overriding theme, but I'd add some softer, highly achievable additions to the recommendations. Starting with antenatal classes. As well as the lessons in breathing for pain relief and the introduction to other new parents, there is surely room for measured conversation about the possibility that your birth will not go to plan and how to deal with the trauma, if it comes. With this should come, too, the acknowledgment and support for people who want elective C-sections (a number of my friends chose, or fought for, caesareans after harrowing first births) and those who can't or don't want to breastfeed, especially following trauma.

There's still, I think, a code of silence around difficult births, the sense that one might summon ghosts and bring bad luck into the room. I get it: pregnancy lends itself to a kind of magical thinking, this unseen creature growing inside you, that got there, you say, from sex? But often this obscures reality. The prospect of pain is discussed in mad new ways – one hypno-birthing session I did as my due date approached reassured me labour would not hurt if performed correctly. Now I understand that lesson maybe as a way of rethinking the language of pain, or of attempting to reduce our fear, but at the time it threw me into pits of confusion and guilt. It was a minor example of the many linguistic musings thrown over conversations with parents-to-be, to diffuse anxiety, or encourage the brisk getting-on-with-it. More clarity, more honesty (as well, of course, as properly funding the NHS and profoundly improving the quality of care to women) might help prevent so many negative experiences of birth, and help us walk confidently into parenthood, rather than crawling on our knees. ■

One more thing...

There's a **Beryl Cook/Tom of Finland** exhibition at Studio Voltaire in south London and I could not love it more. Cook, whose work looks at class, bodies, pleasure and the commercial is contextualised by Tom of Finland in relation to LGBTQ+ history and representation, while hers highlights the socio-political aspects of his. It is quite thrilling.

Elizabeth Strout's new novel (out in September), her 10th, is typically brilliant about friendship and past loves in a small town. And fans will be excited to meet **Olive Kitteridge** again, telling Lucy Barton the stories of her life, while lawyer Bob Burgess takes on a murder case. It's always a treat to be reunited with old friends, especially those written by Strout.

Genius comedian **Chris Fleming**'s work is often described as surrealist, while he remains the sane voice of reason, marvelling onstage at our melting, odd little world. He's just announced a UK tour – treat yourself to an hour of weird, lovely joy.

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This much I know

Adjoa Andoh, actor, 61

I liked my own company as a child. I grew up in the Cotswolds – Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* is like a documentary of my childhood. I liked playing in the woods down by the stream. I would take a book with me. I'd dress up and pretend to be other people, do plays with other kids in front rooms. It started early.

There was always music at home. My dad played lots of instruments and the music would be classical – African, choral, modern. My grandmother in Ghana played guitar in a palm court orchestra in the 1920s. All I ever wanted to be was a bass player in a punk band.

There were three black people in our village: me, my dad and my brother. I was the only girl of colour in a secondary school of over 1,000 kids. Children seize on your difference. But they also seize on your smartness and your comedy value. I could also fight – I learned very quickly.

Where I grew up, nobody was an actress. I had the interview at Cambridge University to do law, but I flunked all my A-levels. That was around the time my parents were divorcing. Eventually, I started the law degree, but bailed after two years because I'd joined a black women's group at Bristol Polytechnic and met a San Francisco woman called Deb'borah John-Wilson, who ran acting classes. She got funded to do a show in London and suggested I audition for it – I got the part. It was a time of great awakening.

My three years on *Casualty* taught me discipline. I worked with the great Derek Thompson. He'd been in it from the get-go, but would come to work every day, infused with how we could make a scene more vibrant, more credible, give it extra swing. I took a lesson from that.

Getting older, your life goes forwards and backwards. In my heart I'm still a 14-year-old punk watching the Clash

Interview **VICKI POWER**
Photograph **CHARLIE CLIFT**

My first baby came along as my career started, so I've always had kids and worked. None of them are actors. They're smart, funny and curious and I feel proud that my kids can be in any room with anyone and engage in conversation.

My husband [novelist Howard Cunnell] is my best pal. We met when I was running a fantasy football league at the Royal Court. I support Leeds and he supports Arsenal.

All those clichés about getting older are true. I have a birdsong app; I love

gardening. You start to have a life that goes forwards and backwards. In my heart I'm still a 14-year-old punk rocker watching the Clash.

My faith is enormously important to me. I was born in a Christian household and I've searched for the spark of the divine. I'm a reader in the Church of England, which means I can preach, lead services and do funerals. I like to engage with people. Whether it's at church or doing a panto, it's all the same to me. ■

The Red King is on Alibi now





'Growing up we had nothing as a family, but we had fun and jokes and love. We had each other': Paul Weller on the roof terrace of London's Century Club this month





‘Look for the good in things’

At 66, the Modfather may have mellowed, but he’s lost none of his cool. Paul Weller tells Miranda Sawyer how he beat his demons, found a new sound – and why he’s still angry with the establishment

Photographs DEAN CHALKLEY

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In a roof garden, high above central London, stands Paul Weller, reed-slim in a pale mac, black trousers and shades. Silver hair slicked back, slight smile, lord of all he surveys. He looks so cool, it's almost funny. Why hasn't he put on weight? Why hasn't he lost his hair? How come he can wear those sunglasses and not look like he's trying too hard? Because he's Paul Weller, that's why. Being cool is one of Weller's USPs, and it has been ever since the Jam's first *Top of the Pops* appearance, in 1977, for *In The City*. He, Bruce Foxton and Rick Weller all wore the same outfit: white shirt, skinny tie, buttoned-up black jacket, black trousers. But Weller's haircut was better, his jacket tighter, he wore it all more convincingly. He's had so many style iterations over the years. There are few heterosexual men who've tried, at different times, a slicked-back flicka, plus denim cutoffs and espadrilles, as well as a chop-fringe feather cut with sports shirt and mum slacks, and managed to look good in both. (You only have to glance at Weller's longtime fanbase to see how tricky his looks can be to carry off.)

The other Weller USP is, of course, his music. He's had No 1 albums in five consecutive decades, as the Jam, the Style Council and as a solo act; made scratchy R&B, punchy pop, tuneful Euro-soul, as well as house music, folk, psychedelia... In his youth, his creativity was hide-bound by tight rules handed down by an unseen Mod God, but since 2008's *22 Dreams*, he's pretty much done what he likes. He works hard and he works a lot.

Photos done, quick cig, then, wired as ever: "How long we got?" he wonders, about the interview. Weller's always on a schedule. No time-wasters, get it done, move on. We perch at an indoor-outdoor table, the spring air blowing through the bar. He leans forward, not tense, but ready.

Two days ago, and the day before his 66th birthday, he released 66, his 17th solo LP. It was named, in part, as a nod to his birthday, but also because, says Weller, 1966 was a good year. "Tomorrow Never Knows [by the Beatles; the last track on *Revolver*] was 1966," he says, "and that's still yet to be bettered, in terms of forward-looking, futuristic sound. And football, the only year we won the World Cup."

Which is nice, but, really, not much is '66-ish about the album itself. It boasts a cover by celebrated 60s artist Sir Peter Blake, but, if we're being picky, the album cover that made Blake's name was for *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and that came out in 1967. And like many of Weller's recent LPs, there isn't really an underlying conceptual idea; it's simply what he calls "a collection of songs", whittled down from around 30 created over the past three years. If you were looking for a theme, then you might find it in the album's sonic atmosphere, which is lush, romantic, a little jazz noir, a lot of yearning. There are sparkling strings, the occasional harp. "I see it as my crooner album," says Weller. "Me in a velvet bow tie. Cabaret. Stockton-on-Tees, here I come."

He's joking, though his voice has definitely become more soulful over the years. Plus, the joke makes more sense when you know how some of the songs were written. There are several well-known contributors to 66 – Noel Gallagher, Bobby Gillespie, Suggs, Dr Robert, Erland Cooper – but they're not singing or playing. Instead, they're there as lyricists; so perhaps Weller is a bit like a crooner, in that, on certain songs, even though he wrote the music, he's interpreting other people's words.

It's quite unusual to get other people to write lyrics for you, rather than sing a chorus, or play a solo, I say. He shrugs: "I got sick of trying to find different ways of saying exactly the same thing. The older I've got, the less I've got to say." He rubs his face. Though he loves a chat, the bits of his job that Weller finds difficult are to do with words: lyrics and interviews. "I've spent years trying to explain," he says. "Why did you write this? I don't know." At least with these lyrics, it's someone else's ideas, I say. "It's a get-out clause," he says. "You can ask me what the words mean and I can say, 'I dunno, you'll have to ask them. They wrote it.'"

Despite this, we chat about a couple. First, Soul Wandering, words written by Bobby Gillespie, along the lines of "I'm still searching for meaning and want to believe



'Me in a velvet bow tie. Cabaret. Stockton-on-Tees, here I come'

in something greater than me." Weller "totally related" to the sentiment. "Maybe it's an age thing," he says. "When you see the state of the world, what a mess it all is. It's about having something to hold on to, I think. You haven't got to be a Christian, you just have faith in something else beyond the cruelty and the disgusting behaviour of the humans. Look for the good in things."

And there's *Nothing*, a dreamy late-night jazz affair that recalls an old relationship when it was young and "we had nothing". This started with "a beautiful poem", written by a mate of Suggs called Chalky; it fitted perfectly with some music Weller had already made. "I found the words really touching," he says. "They could be about a lot of things and, for me, I related them to my family growing up. We had fuck all, but we had fun and jokes and love, and what you don't have, you don't miss anyway, do you? We had each other."

Weller grew up in Woking, Surrey, with his sister, his taxi-driver dad and his cleaner mum, and started in bands during his teens, playing covers at working men's clubs. His dad became his manager and once Weller got the Jam together, success came quickly. From the late 70s until the late 80s, he banged through the jittery, political Jam and more soulful, jazz-tinged Style Council, clocking up hit after hit, before losing his record deal and having to recalibrate. Those wilderness years taught him a lot – his dad made him go back on the road, because he needed to earn; he found that playing live led to him writing songs again – and since his huge solo come-back, with 1993's *Wild Wood*, he's never stopped.

He knows what he wants to do, Weller, and he's clear-eyed in his approach and his assessment of his own talents. He thinks his strong points are his voice and his "gift for melody"; he says he's written some good lyrics, but not

Front man: (clockwise from above) in the Style Council, 1985; with the Jam in 1980; and 1977; with his wife Hannah, and two of his children, Natt and Dylan



that many, and he's an all-right guitarist. "I can't get above a certain standard, but I practise." Oh, and he thinks he's good live, as long as the gig isn't too big. He was one of the support acts for Blur at Wembley Stadium last summer and he found it a bit weird. Arena gigs, generally, are not his thing, watching the band on a big screen, the sound all washy because you're miles from the stage. "It's a night out for a lot of people, isn't it? Their one big night out," he says. "And that's when it becomes a show, not about the music. It's really hard to make contact and I'm not cut out for that. It's not like I'm crowd surfing or putting the mic up for the crowd to sing lalala and all that."

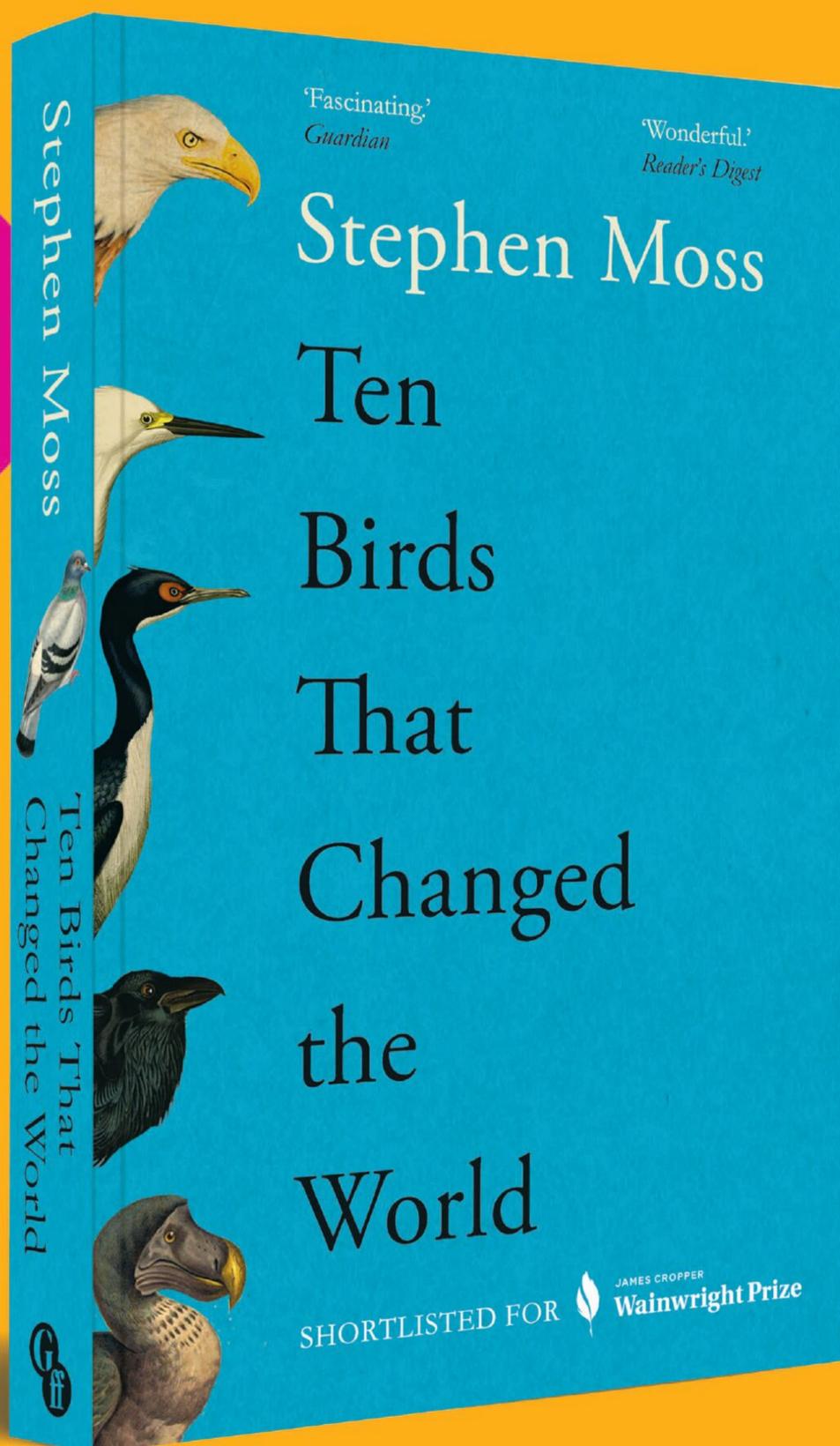
What about festivals, does he enjoy playing them? Or going, even?

"I've only been at festivals when they pay me," he says, appalled. "They wouldn't entice me otherwise. Stand in a field of mud and shit for hours, off my face? Doesn't appeal to me. Call me old-fashioned. I just like a roof on it." >

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› Weller seemed in his element when I saw him play at Shepherd's Bush Empire a few weeks ago and he's like that when I talk to him, too. Though he'll never be completely relaxed – he's naturally impatient and twitchy; he still smokes like it's the last fag before his execution – right at the moment, he's extremely content with his lot. His older kids are doing well and his younger ones are a source of joy. He has a big brood: Natt, 36, lives in LA and directs short films; singer Leah, 32, has two children, one a new-born (he shows me a sweet snap of him holding his brand new granddaughter, Kiyo Soul); Dylan, 29, works in the New York fashion industry; Jesamine, 24, is at uni, studying mental-health nursing, and Stevie, 19, is into skateboarding, and teaches it as well.

At home, there are his kids with his wife of 14 years, Hannah (they met when she was a backing singer for his 22 *Dreams* album). So, 12-year-old twins JP (John Paul) and Bowie, who are “chalk and cheese”. Bowie is hugely into football; JP is not, but is just “good at everything”. And Nova, seven, is “a mad creative person, eccentric, but I love it. She never gets bored, she's always building, creating, a real character”. The younger ones are home-schooled and have lots of friends “from all walks of life, different friends from different situations”.

We talk about his working-class roots and I ask what class he thinks his kids are. “I feel they're classless, personally. They're outside all that. As they should be. Classless and free,” he says. “Me and my missus are the same, she comes from a council estate. So they grew up having that perspective, but they don't go through that experience. That's the difference. Hopefully they grow up with the ethic that we have, that you have to work for things. As long as they're not – what's the word? – entitled.”

Weller himself is far from entitled. “I'm so lucky to be able to do what I do.” He enjoys his time with his family. He loves his job. You could say he's reached his mellow stage, except he expresses his contentment in an entirely un-mellow manner. “If the universe took me tomorrow,” he says, “which hopefully it won't, but if it did, I couldn't really fucking complain.” He's found that not drinking for 14 years has really helped; not just because of the lack of hangovers, but because it's made him “discard all the crap” he once thought was part of his personality. “A lot of the demons I thought were there just disappeared once I stopped drinking. So perhaps they were all in that bottle. All imagined. A little safety blanket.”

His anger hasn't evaporated completely. At his gig, I noticed he had a Palestinian flag on display, though he made no mention of it during the performance. When I bring it up, he's more than happy to talk. “Am I against genocides and ethnic cleansing? Yes, I am, funnily enough,” he says. “I can't understand why more people aren't up in arms about what's going on. We should be ashamed of ourselves. One minute you're supplying bullets and bombs and guns, and then you're sending over food. How does that work?”

He's still pretty fired up about the state of the UK, too. I mention a few politicians – Keir Starmer, Rishi Sunak, even Nigel Farage – have been spotted in old-school Adidas Samba and Gazelle trainers. “Were they wearing them with a suit?” he asks. (Starmer wasn't; Farage was; Sunak was in suit trousers and a white shirt.) “That's not right, is it? But anyway, fuck all the people you mentioned. Mugs, all of them.” He liked Corbyn, but isn't too fussed about Starmer. He can't see much difference between the parties: “You can either vote for Rishi Sunak's Tory party, or you can vote for Keir Starmer's Tory party.” He probably won't vote at all, though he does like “Angela something, the one who's a normal working-class mum.” Angela Rayner? “Yeah, that's her.”

“The corruptness and cronyism, and the lies and deceit of most



of those politicians...” he says. “They're supposed to be your betters, your leaders. But they've been selling off the periphery of the NHS for years and let it fall into disrepair, and it's going to get eaten away and eaten away until it's off their hands, and it's all privatised. And that's one of our crown jewels, the NHS. It's supposed to be ours, we all pay for it. It's a total piss-take... People are getting to that point where they think, “You've just got to do it for yourself.” Whether that's a revolution or not, I don't know.”

What gives him hope, outside his family, is music, of course. He's still hugely engaged with it, and talks to me about Liam Bailey, Vegyn, Summer Pearl, Yussef Dayes, Ezra Collective. He went to see Soft Launch recently. “I was right at the back. The crowd were all like, way, way younger than me, but it was great. There was a genuine excitement. I haven't seen that for a long time. Even some girls sort of screaming a little bit. I was like, “That's fucking brilliant.”

Soft Launch are supposedly part of a new Britpop scene, I say, and we discuss 90s music. He preferred the 90s, generally, to the 80s, when he felt he didn't fit in so well. “Hair was big, shoulder pads, success, everything was massive. A decade of excess.” Plus, he found himself, as he puts it, on the wrong side of the glass – in the production room with the buttons and switches, rather

‘A lot of the demons that I thought were there just disappeared once I stopped drinking. So perhaps they were all in that bottle. All imagined’: Paul Weller

than in the live room with the instruments, playing. But in the early 90s, he says, “the music was more interesting. I got turned on to so much music at that time as well. I dropped all my blinkers, a real education.” He went to the Fez, in Paddington, to Giles Peterson's night, he remembers, and to Dingwalls to hear Norman Jay.

And the fashion suited him more, of course. Idly, I wonder if he's ever bought any clothes that turned out to look bad. I assume not, but he insists he has.

“I'm attracted by colours, right? My favourite colour is red, but it doesn't really work because it's hard to wear,” he says. “But sometimes I'll walk into a shop and there's a red jumper or something and I think, ‘I've got to have that.’ I've bought loads of rubbish.”

What's the worst thing you've bought?

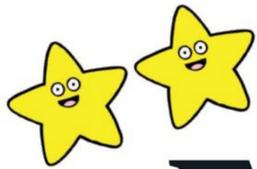
“I bought this mesh T-shirt, a sort of string thing, but black. I thought it was really cool, right? I saw Steve Marriott wear a white one, so I thought it was mod, but it wasn't. I put it on, and Hannah and the kids were like, ‘What the fuck is that?’”

Even you would find it hard to carry off a string vest, I say.

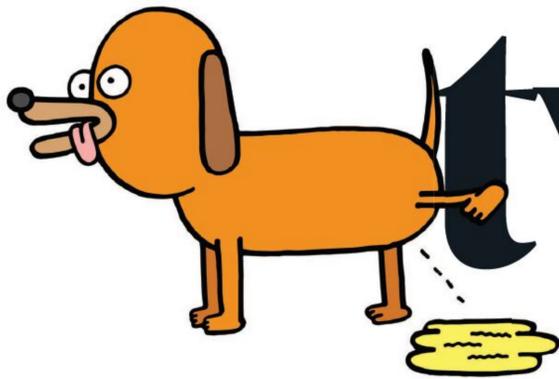
“I'm trying to be a bit more selective in my old age. But I keep getting attracted to the bright colours!” ■

Paul Weller's latest album, 66, is out now on Polydor Records (paulweller.com)

‘That's one of our crown jewels, the NHS. It's supposed to be ours’



My week? I'd give it two stars



From movies to takeaways, and gyms to holidays, we all love handing out a star rating. But what would you give your life? And, particularly, this past week? Joel Golby decides to give it a go

Illustrations AL MURPHY

Humans are compelled to review. The five-star and 10-point rating systems just make implicit sense to us, each number having its own gravity and texture that can be transposed on to a gut-feeling or opinion. So, last night's dinner: what was that? I had a sort of dal and paratha thing that I'd put at about 7/10 (it was nice, but 8 feels too much). Obviously *Dune: Part Two* was a five-star movie whereas *Dune* was maybe only a four.

But we are powerfully swayed by other people's reviews, too. I am forever in some area of London, not knowing where I am or what I want to eat, squinting at Google Maps through raindrops, deciding whether I want to eat at the 4.4-rated pizza place or the 4.3-rated Vietnamese place. Entire evenings of my life have been shaped by the aggregated internet review culture of Rotten Tomatoes telling me one streaming-service film is slightly better than another. I have blindly bought fragrances, books and music just based on what 1,000 or so anonymous reviewers sort of rated each one out of five.

These are all things, though. You know where you are with a thing. What's harder to attribute a number value to are those ambient feelings and experiences that make up a week. There are a lot of hours in a week (168, I just checked), and a lot of minutes, too (10,800). Not all of those can be good and not all of them can be bad. Over the course of that time, how might you rate an entire week of your life? Well, there's only one way to find out, I suppose.

Looking at the monthly Instagram round-ups of friends with a wincing feeling of despair



The start of the week is also the start of the month and all of my friends are posting round-ups on Instagram of all the things they did in April: the meals they ate, the parties they went to, the walks they enjoyed, the cherished friends they spent time with. I make my thumb sore from liking so many of them. This photo-dump manner of posting emerged a couple of years ago and I briefly enjoyed doing it (and loved seeing it), until two things happened: I saw an errant throwaway tweet by someone I don't know declaring the trend to be "cringe", and also, due to psychological reasons I refuse to ever interrogate, I stopped looking in the mirror whenever possible and stopped having my photo taken and, by extension, taking any photos.

It's a shame, though: I feel as if these times and experiences are slipping through my fingers, when they can be marked and archived and remembered with a quick thumb-tap. It's trite to observe it, but we have an all-powerful tool in our pockets the likes of which no generation of humanity has ever had access to before, and the fact that we can just bop a quick photo of a particularly good pizza (I had one last week with a whole burrata on top of it, unfurling like a flower: already the sensation of it is fading!) before we eat it so we can remember it for ever is an unimaginable gift. I see a particularly

good dump – someone I know went on a bracing camping weekend in Scotland, fresh air and clear water and a well-earned roast in a cosy tavern – and endeavour to take more photos, to capture more memories, to not let entire months of my life slump past me in a grey malaise.

I look around where I am. I'm in a pub that is a 50-yard walk from my house, drinking a can of non-alcoholic lager and, later, once I've done this one bit of work I've been putting off for a fortnight, I'm going to play three rounds of pool against myself to practise my doubles. The phone stays in my pocket. Not everything needs remembering.

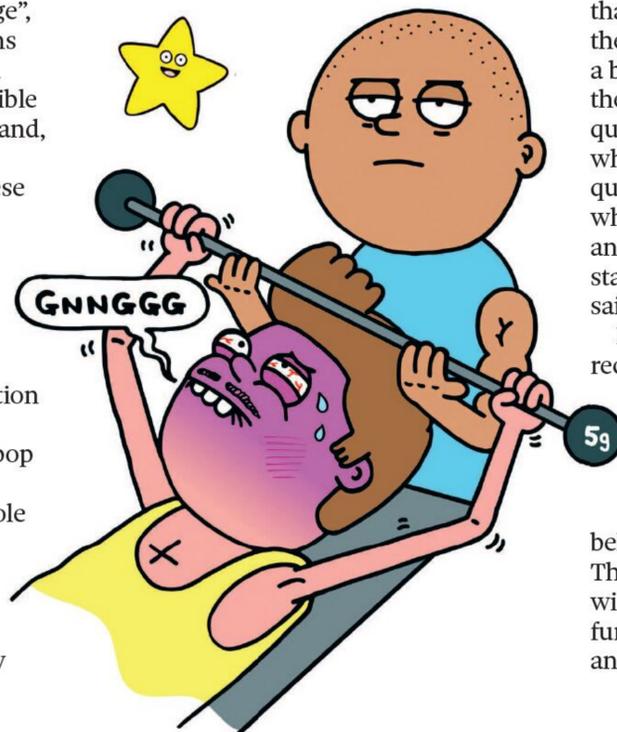
A personal training session that ended up being embarrassing for both of the people involved



I have been making some small lifestyle changes – nothing crazy, just more fruit and vegetables and "healthy proteins", a bit more running and wayyyyy less ketamine – and there have been little to no results, so I booked in a personal training session with the most friendly PT at my gym.

It was a quiet grey Tuesday afternoon, in an empty venue filled only with the hard tinny bounce of exercise-adjacent dance music, and the PT showed me around a few arm and chest machines that I had never even noticed before. At the end I was meant to lie backwards on a bench and lift two 10kg dumbbells in the air, which proved impossible, so he quietly went and got the 8kg dumbbells, which also proved impossible, so he quietly went and got the 6kg dumbbells, which were sort of possible. I clenched and went pink through the exercise as he stared at me like a placid dog. "Right," he said, afterwards. "Well."

I've been thinking about death a lot recently – you get to that age, where it starts to ambiently preoccupy your thoughts, and you think about how much of your life you have lived and whether you have done anything with it – and part of that could well be behind the vegetables and exercise thing. There on the bench, slicked to the leather with a pool of my own meek sweat, I felt further away from health than ever. In an effort to fend it off as long as possible,



I now have to go through this humiliating ritual twice a week every week until I die. Right. Well.

A really good lunch from my big list of lunch spots

★★★★★

A couple of years ago I started a big list on my phone of restaurants I want to go to, because there are so many in London worth the trip and I really shouldn't ever be in one of the better food cities in the world going, "Yeah I'll have the £16 pub cheeseburger, please. And yeah if you can make sure it is really crap – just awful, bad chips as well – that'd be great!"

In a stolen two-hour space between a couple of meetings, I realised I was close to one I'd been wanting to hit for ages – Sonargaon in Whitechapel for the samosa chaat, 3.4-rated on Google which perhaps says more about the review system than this entire week-long experiment – and it was a really sublime way to spend £3. I spent 10 minutes eating on a bench in a nearby park with nowhere near enough napkins for the amount of mess I was making, then got the bus home with a smile on my face.

Accidentally watching the dog while he took a piss in the park

☆☆☆☆☆

Normally I look at my phone while my dog does any sort of toilet stuff, but this morning I left it upstairs, so I just stood and zoned out and watched him. It was only a couple of seconds in that I realised I was looking quite directly at The Stream. Startling and uncomfortable.

Getting a long meandering voicenote from a friend

★★★★★

I was a late convert to voicenote culture – so many of them start with 10 seconds of umming and ahing, the sound of wind blowing violently in the background, the statement, "I'm sending you a voicenote..." (I know!) and, if there's any pertinent information in there, you have to scratch through the audio and find it and replay it and, in certain circumstances, write it down. But then I grew up.

Voicenotes are so joyfully intimate – I like hearing the little background sounds of someone's house, or that feeling of knowing the phone is being walked around with them, as they half-do a chore while talking to you – and I do think, ghoulishly, once people of my generation start to experience more people in their life who die, they will treasure old voicenotes from them where they can hear that person talking (so casually and unguarded!) again.

One of my favourite tricks is to try to send a voicenote from a party or a pints session with the boys, so I can play it back the next day and be in semi-conversation with my drunk self – he seems like he's having fun – and anyway my mate, Dan, sends voicenotes that I think could be classified as art and he did me a five-

minute blockbuster where he just talked me through all the food he's currently fermenting. The joy of my day.

An M&S meal deal that didn't actually do the meal-deal calculation at the self-checkout

☆☆☆☆☆

I was caught in a rush between a train (one star) and a six-hour coach (zero stars) so, in a frantic whirl, grabbed the most rogue M&S meal deal of my life, an extra bottle of water and obviously a packet of Percy Pigs, then went to go and sit in a slightly too-small seat on a slightly too-dark-to-read coach while eating a claggy southern-style chicken wrap. Contrasted with the week's other lunch (good), this felt particularly like failure.

Every meal deal I ever eat while moving quickly because I am running late, actually, feels like failure and I probably have at least one a month. I should basically never be eating a packet of crisps in public unless in a moment of extreme psychic distress. It took me an hour to eat both halves of the wrap because I was so disappointed in myself. Coach got in slightly earlier than advertised, though.

Fretting over buying a vitamin C serum for many, many weeks

☆☆☆☆☆

I added a vitamin C serum to my skincare routine a couple of years ago and felt like it gave me results. You can't say that in front of "skincare people" – they always tell you that you are actually washing and moisturising your face completely

wrong, you idiot – but a brand of vitamin C serum I quite liked became too much of a hassle to buy (it had to be imported; timing the end of one bottle with the 10-12 day delivery timing of another caused headaches) and the high street serum I replaced it with tripled in price for no reason at all, so I had to find a new one.

Searching for a new brand to commit to is an overwhelming chore: I sat down at my computer to do proper and normal research, but then ended up on one forum, then another forum, then reading reviews, then I got distracted. I almost bit the bullet and bought one, but then I balked at the delivery fee. I did the same again the next day, then a lot of a bit of the morning after that. I left tabs open, I mulled. I feel like it should be easier to make decisions than this by now. Anyway I finally got the Geek & Gorgeous one and if it doesn't fix all my problems (both

aesthetic and mental!) in two or three applications, then this has been a lot of energy wasted for nothing. You're not allowed to contact me and tell me that this was wrong.

A shower I couldn't really get the temperature right on

☆☆☆☆☆

We recently moved from one flat in our building to another, the new flat is in a slightly different configuration to the old one, and it's just been a series of small domestic nightmares in a row. One of them is: it's been three months and I still can't really get a handle on the shower – the temperature gauge is too sensitive, veering from scalding-hot to bone-cold over the course of a half-millimetre dial turn – and I just had one of those showers where you are constantly fiddling with the heat, never quite finding temperature parity.

I find, perhaps, oversized humiliation in these small daily failures, and as I just accepted the shower's unsatisfying water it made my mind start to wander, which, as ever, makes it spiral around the plughole of the abyss. A close friend turned 40 recently; another had a gorgeous, squishy little baby; a man I know through friends and have a lot of fondness for, but don't really actually know had a mild heart attack. I cannot lift a child-sized dumbbell. I am 36, now, closing in on 37. My 30th birthday was a great, glorious, sunny day, spent at the pub in a crisp perfect white T-shirt with a number of friends I don't really know any more, and I thought about how much my life had changed in such a relatively short but also sort of long period of time.

I spent my 20s not thinking too much about how much of my life was moving past me, and then a bit of my 30s happened, and all of a sudden I feel like – however distantly – I am counting down on the timer rather than counting up on it. How many more chubby little babies will be born, how many more bottles of vitamin C serum will I go through, how many failed chest presses, until I am described as "a guy I sort of knew had a mild heart attack"?

I sat on the edge of the bath, wrapped in a towel, shivering slightly and performed the skincare routine I pray will keep me looking young for as long as possible. I still pay money to a landlord to use a shower that is unfit for purpose. Also, we are out of shower gel and I don't know where the replacement bottle is. Surrounded by steam, I experienced a profound feeling of failure.

The aggregated week in general

☆☆☆☆☆

Started pretty well, then I think around the time of the meal deal it really began to slip, and by Friday I was emotionally in the gutter. The samosa and the voicenote bring it up to around a two stars. ■

Four Stars: a Life. Reviewed by Joel Golby is published by Harper Collins at £16.99. Buy it for £14.95 at guardianbookshop.com



‘Makeup was my gateway drug to self-harm’

Photograph SOPHIA SPRING

As a girl, Emma Forrest defaced herself with eyeliner and lipstick to convey the emotional maelstrom she felt inside. Later, she learned to navigate love affairs with bronzer and bow-shaped lips. Now in her 40s, she has finally mastered how to use makeup as an agent of joy

The connection I feel between makeup and mental health started before I was old enough to wear it out of the house – either the cosmetics or the mood swings. It first began with someone else’s irrational behaviour: antisemitism at primary school. This was exactly the age I was starting to contemplate my appearance. The club classic: “Aren’t you sorry you killed Christ?” was a regular. Because of my curly hair and olive skin they called me the N-word – a small child has to really yearn to use the N-word to say it to a predominantly Ashkenazi Jew. They also incorporated into their bullying the three moles I have on my right cheek. “See, that’s proof, these are the mark of the devil,” they said. So you’d think I was interested in things to flatten and cover those moles, but I actually retaliated by using my mum’s eye pencil to draw them on even more prominently.

After a bad day at secondary school – where I had friends,

but an impossible time concentrating – I’d lock myself in the bathroom to make up my face with immaculate focus. If I got it slightly wrong, I’d need to make it much worse – swooping lipstick circles and bad words in eyeliner – until I’d made myself look how I felt inside. Once I’d studied the monster in the mirror, I meticulously washed it off. It was, I realised later, a gateway drug to bulimia and self-harm.

The source of my tools was the regular care packages I received from my mum’s friend, Nancy, who lived in Manhattan, where she designed Clinique packaging. It isn’t lost on me that it was a high-end “career-lady-you-can-have-it-all” brand I used to express my terror at impending womanhood. Their unbeatable “Black Honey” lipgloss was as sticky and dark as my inner world.

By the time I went into the world at 15 as a working journalist, I was wearing the wrong foundation – garish, mad, the wrong colour and generally in service of a place I shouldn’t have been with someone who should have known better. Someone who should have said: “This girl

does not know how to apply makeup. This girl is a child and should not be out with adults.”

There was something legitimately “wrong” with me and it emerged when I moved to New York at 21, as if the city were mediaeval leeches placed on my skin. I would be successfully rewired with medication, a great talk therapist and regular physical exercise (all three I keep up to this day, decades later, and have had no bipolar incidents in 15 years).

When I moved to New York, one of the first friends I made was Bianca, a receptionist at *Nylon* magazine who oversaw the makeup closet, which was full of samples and freebies. She also worked as a sales girl at Miu Miu, and we’d sneak into the dressing room of the store to have her do my makeup if I was ever doing a photoshoot.

When I attempted suicide at 22, I ended up in St Vincent’s Hospital in the West Village, and I remember Bianca leaning over me in the ward, touching my face with her bag of different brushes. I don’t know if she was the one who’d cleaned off the black charcoal from my jaw that >





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The Guardian Weekly

› they'd used to make me puke up the pills. But, under the fluorescent glare, she was applying blush to my cheeks, because having arrived in the ER as an attempted suicide and then, on being saved, immediately asking the handsome attending doctor if he wanted to make love – what was there to say?

Only a few months later, 9/11 happened and we raced to St Vincent's to give blood, but they didn't need any because there were no survivors. We sat all week on the stoop of the Cherry Tavern bar in masks we'd been told to wear because of the toxic ash in the air.

At 25, I fell hard for a visiting Maori actor, who'd met me at a rooftop party in high summer and approached, thinking I was Latina. When he introduced me to his Maori friends he always said: "She's not British, she's Jewish." He was proud of the same part of me those kids at school had been repulsed by. I left trails of bronzer on his clothes, a terracotta Guerlain powder I bought at an airport on one of the many backs and forths of this longest of long-distance relationships, my triangle of satanic moles photographed at various points in the Polynesian triangle.

In winter, I wore a perfect red lipstick from Shu Uemura, who no longer produce makeup at all. Discontinued makeup turns my stomach in a particular way that most closely resembles the end of love: what makes you feel beautiful can't always stay and you can only try to source a duplicate. Or, to see it more optimistically, none of us has only one soulmate, and it's OK to have a "type".

Now I won't buy a lipstick if I've forgotten my glasses and can't read the name – because the name, as much as the colour, is the invocation, as sure as laying out your crystals to be charged by the full moon. I wrote my third novel in 2004, and called it *Cherries in the Snow*, inspired by a job my mum did at Revlon, coming up with the names for their products. The most famous, "Fire and Ice" and "Cherries in the Snow", weren't hers, but she did come up with "Flamingo". The idea – which I don't think I fully brought to fruition in that book, being still too young and unstable – was: "Can you make things safe by naming them?"

I've reached my 40s with the same signature makeup still in place: red bow-shaped lips. On the surface they mean, "Don't kiss me, just watch me speak." But the red mouth stems from a core childhood memory: the opening credit sequence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* where the lips are in sync with the music, until the moment they peel back to reveal their teeth and morph into an x-ray. What was offered as sexy, covers the disturbance underneath. I've been "sane" for so long now, but that image still does something to me.

I married while living and working in Hollywood. We had a child, I got divorced and moved back to London two decades after leaving. When, recently, on a whim, I started doing makeup videos on my Instagram, I said, realising as I said it, "There are celebrity makeup lines I don't want to put on my face, because your skin is the largest organ of your body, and it is porous." As good as her tinted serum may be, I don't want what I personally perceive of, for example, Victoria Beckham, to touch me. I don't want that on me, even when I read about it in the papers. I want it off me.

And I remain alarmed by Kylie Jenner's billion-dollar cosmetics line, particularly her stay-put lip product. I've tried it; it is a hit because it works. But think about what the Kardashian name was first ever connected to in the public domain: OJ Simpson being defended at his murder trial by Robert Kardashian. I don't want the Kardashian family's "Out Damned Spot" on my lips.

I didn't know, when I first started experimenting with makeup that, in my 40s, I'd allocate so much of any cheque for skincare – laser, facials, micro-needling – that I don't ever wear foundation. Maybe the teenage cutter in me would like to have known about the paid package version of self-inflicted pain that's actually self-improvement.

Anchored and domestic, I still think of that 12-year-old girl defacing her face in the locked bathroom, even as I take note of the makeup columns in every newspaper. I am always waiting to see what washcloths get recommended: microfibre? Sea sponge? What will wash things



Makeup was a cover-up – kids said my moles were a sign of the antichrist



away so you can start again? Double cleansing? Foaming oil? The pricey version of this routine is hotel rooms. The fresh start each day: the room made clean for you. Every woman's makeup and cleansing routine is a hotel room that they can afford and is easy to travel to.

Makeup today can be so heavy on intricate tutorials that it's alienating for someone who dropped out of school. I love makeup, but to see the step-by-step guides it's become as if blow jobs were only jobs. This is the autodidact nature of having quit school at 15: the profound offence I take at anything, including makeup, that offers instruction.

In 2024, the makeup collaborations you can find (with Hello Kitty for Pixi or *The Muppets* for Ciaté) confuse that line between child and adult woman in a more overt way than I navigated as a "working" child. I battle with my

11-year-old daughter about makeup being for play and not for wearing out of the house. How do I explain that this is because there are bad people out there, in a way that isn't frightening? How, then, to make sense for her of the Sanrio and Disney crossover lines?

Where I am in life is this: my kid can't wear her expertly applied makeup publicly, but when I see garish makeup on an older woman I love it, especially under the harsh lights on public transport. Because I – who first used makeup as self-harm – am now seeing makeup for joy, not to look older or to look younger. Haus Labs, Lady Gaga's range, is particularly play friendly.

My biggest hatred, however, is the *Euphoria* makeup trend: the confusion and distress of the teen painted directly on to the face in glitter tears. You might argue it's a modern take on the Pierrot, but Pierrot is elegant and this is an aesthetic trickled down from hardcore porn: that a woman's makeup should be smeared. That the vulnerable should be visually ruined.

When I struggled with mental health, we used makeup to cover up. Bianca, who'd made me up in the hospital, turned me on to Diorshow waterproof mascara, which we both relied on because we were always crying and didn't want anyone to know. It is shocking for me, the girl from that locked bathroom, to see makeup as a display of what's being battled inside. The neon star stickers worn publicly for pimples is the right of a generation whose mental-health status is listed on their dating app profile. Everything is named. Nothing is blended. Nothing is camouflage.

TikTok beauty enthusiasts ask you to take a quiz for your most flattering makeup look: are you an autumn or a summer, spring or winter? I am emotionally autumn, because I am in my late 40s and feel earthed without being earth-bound, the potency of my leaves turning golden, so I catch my own breath in wonder. It can't last. Winter has to come, but there will be makeup for that. I love Ruth Gordon in *Rosemary's Baby* as a makeup icon. I'd love to wear green eye powder that suggests I might impregnate you with the devil's baby while also admiring your furniture. Maybe that's full life circle from the kids who said my moles were the sign of the antichrist.

Makeup artist Kay Montano asked me, ahead of this *Observer* portrait, what I wanted her to convey. My initial answer was, please convey that, even if I can't fix them, I know what all my problems are. Instead, I sent her a photo where I thought I'd done my makeup well. "I get the kind of makeup you like," she replied, "It works day-to-night,

overnight and the day after." Yes! That's what I was trying to say! The play makeup of youth and old age is invigorating, but in autumn – when a lot has been unpacked and nothing has been buried alive – just give me makeup that says you saw me for who I really was. ■

If you have been affected by any of these issues, contact Samaritans on 116 123, or call Mind on 0300 123 3393



Fresh starts: (from top) Emma and Bianca in their 20s in NY, 2008; pictures from a photo booth in Manhattan, 2001; and with her daughter last month

Food & drink

Nigel Slater



@NigelSlater



Some days are best spent baking – just for the fun of it

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

An early summer afternoon in the kitchen and the sun is beaming through the skylights. An hour to two of gentle cooking without the ticking clock of making dinner. An afternoon in which I put together savoury biscuits as fragile as frost on a windowpane, and rolls of filo pastry so thin you could see their contents of asparagus and feta hiding within. This is cooking for the joy of it.

The biscuits are mostly cheese and butter, held together with a little flour and egg, their filling lightly beaten cream cheese and soft-leaved herbs. They can carry a little warmth, too, in the form of ground Aleppo pepper or, should you prefer, smoked paprika. If you don't want to sandwich them, custard-cream style,

then the biscuits are good on their own, served with drinks.

The asparagus is wrapped in buttered filo scattered with thyme leaves and a crumbling of feta. This time, I made them large enough to demand a knife and fork, but you could cut the spears in half and make smaller ones, more tightly rolled, to bring out before dinner. Either way, you will need a plate or an outstretched palm, to catch the crumbs of the buttery pastry that shatters as you eat.

I am not given to fiddly cooking, yet this was a summer's afternoon of quiet pleasure. Handling the cheese biscuits carefully, spooning on a little filling, then tenderly pressing a second biscuit on top

– a step apart from the quick supper that was to follow. Cooking need not always be about getting something on the table. Sometimes, cooking can be just for the love of it, a treat to yourself and, of course, others.

Asparagus and feta rolls

To keep the pastry crisp, place a baking sheet in the oven when you switch the oven on. Place the tray of asparagus rolls on top of the hot tray. Use 1 to 3 spears of asparagus for each roll, depending on the thickness of your spears. *Makes 8, serves 4. Ready in less than 1 hour*

butter 70g
filo pastry 2 sheets
asparagus 8–24 spears, depending on their thickness
feta cheese 300g
thyme leaves 2 tbsp, chopped
parmesan 8 tbsp, finely grated

Preheat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. Place a spare baking sheet in the oven to warm.

Soften the butter in a small saucepan. Cut each sheet of filo into quarters. Trim the asparagus. Brush each of the filo rectangles with the melted butter – be generous – then crumble over 2 tbsp of the feta and the thyme. Sprinkle each with a scant tbsp of the grated parmesan, reserving a little to scatter over at the end.

Place 1 to 3 thick spears of asparagus, depending on thickness, on a pastry piece, positioning them almost at the edge of the long side nearest you, then roll up in the pastry. Place the roll, join-side down, on the parchment-lined baking sheet, then continue with the remaining pastry and asparagus. Brush each one with a little more of the butter and dust with a little more parmesan.

Bake for about 12 minutes until crisp and golden. Eat warm, while the pastry is still crisp and flaky.

Cream cheese and herb biscuits

The most fragile of biscuits, these need to be handled carefully and eaten within an hour or so of being filled. Whether you fill them or not, they are best eaten on the day they are made. You can leave them rough edged or, for a neater finish, use a cookie cutter on them as soon as they come from the oven. The trimmings left behind are something to scatter over a dish of pasta. *Makes 24. Ready in 1 hour* >



All wrapped up:
asparagus and feta
rolls. Facing page:
cream cheese and
herb biscuits

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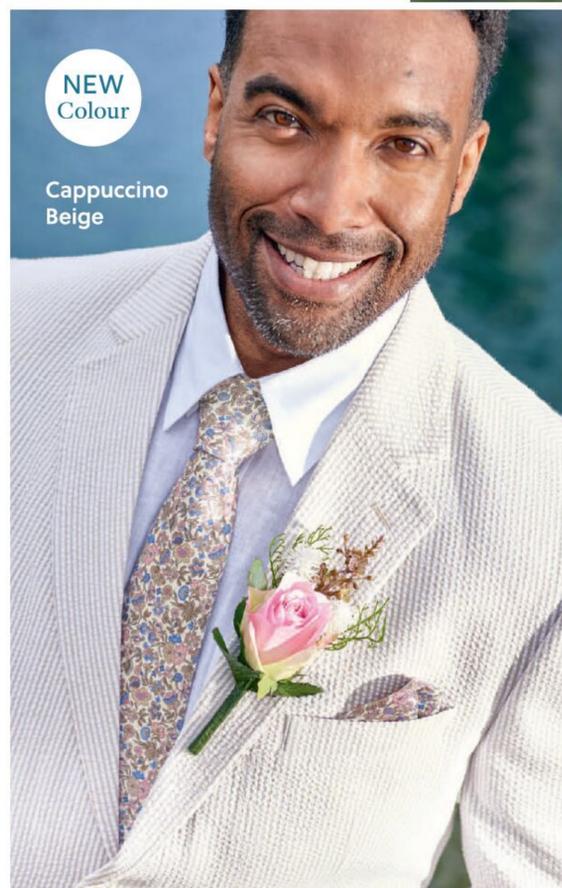
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Food & drink

Nigel Slater

Asparagus is wrapped in filo with thyme leaves and feta – the buttery pastry shatters as you eat

plain flour 125g
butter 125g, cold
parmesan 125g, finely grated
egg yolks 2, lightly beaten
Aleppo pepper or paprika a generous pinch

For the filling:

full-fat cream cheese 250g
dill, chives and tarragon leaves 1 tbsp each, finely chopped

To finish:

chives, garlic flowers or a pinch of Aleppo pepper

Line a baking sheet with baking parchment. Preheat the oven to 180C/gas mark 4. If you have a spare baking sheet, put one in the oven to warm.

Put the plain flour, butter and a grinding or two of black pepper into the bowl of a food processor and reduce to the texture of soft, fresh breadcrumbs. (I rather enjoy doing this by hand, rubbing the flour and butter to velvety crumbs with fingers and thumbs.)

Mix in the finely grated parmesan – and it must be finely grated otherwise your biscuits will fall apart – then, using a fork, mix in the egg yolks and Aleppo pepper. Bring the dough together with lightly floured hands to form a ball, cut in half, then roll each one into a fat cylinder about 5cm in diameter.

Slice each roll of dough into rounds, about 0.5cm thick (you should get about 12 from each roll), then place the biscuits on the parchment-lined baking sheet leaving a little space around each one.

Bake for 10 minutes in the oven on top of the hot baking sheet – they should be a rich golden colour – then leave to settle for 5 minutes before carefully transferring to a cooling rack, using a palette knife. (If you pick them up with your fingers they will probably crumble.)

To make the filling, scoop the cream cheese into a mixing bowl, then stir in the chopped herbs and mix well. When the biscuits are cool, set half of them aside. Turn one half of them over then place 2 heaped teaspoons of filling on to each one. Lightly press one of the reserved biscuits on top of each one and transfer to a serving plate or board. If you wish, place a tuft of chive or garlic flowers on top, or the merest pinch of Aleppo pepper. ■



Nigel's midweek dinner

Pappardelle with peppers and pine kernels

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

Bring a large, deep pan of water to the boil and salt it generously. Drop in 200g of pappardelle or spaghetti and cook for the time suggested on the packet – this will be roughly 8-9 minutes.

While the pasta boils, drain 150g of bottled, roasted peppers from their brine and put them in a blender jug. Add either 2 roasted garlic cloves or 2 tsp of roasted garlic paste, about 10 medium-sized basil leaves and 2 tbsp of chopped flatleaf parsley.

In a dry, shallow pan, toast 4 tbsp of pine kernels until golden, shaking the pan from time to time. Add half of them to the peppers and herbs and set the other half aside for later.

Halve 3 medium-sized tomatoes, add them to the blender jug, then process to a thick, lumpy sauce. Season to taste with black pepper.

Drain the pasta and leave in the colander. Return the empty pan to the heat, transfer the sauce to the pan, scraping it out from the blender jug with a rubber spatula so not to waste any sauce, and let it bubble for a minute. Return the pasta to the pan. Stir in 1 tbsp of capers, then divide between 2 pasta bowls. Scatter over the reserved pine kernels and a little olive oil. *Enough for 2. Ready in 15 minutes*

◆ This roasted pepper sauce is also a cracker with gnocchi. Toss cooked potato gnocchi in the sauce and tip into a small, oven-proof dish, scatter with grated parmesan and bake until thoroughly hot with the parmesan starting to turn gold.

◆ The pepper sauce also works as an accompaniment to grilled lamb or tuna. ■

Food & drink

Jay Rayner



@jayrayner1

Done with small plates? You'll miss the jazzy cooking at this cheery Cheltenham spot

Sam's Montpellier

Montpellier Courtyard,
Montpellier Street,
Cheltenham GL50 1SR
(01242 252752,
samsmontpellier.co.uk)
Earth **£7.50-£10.50**
Land **£11-£15.50**
Sea **£12-£13**
Dessert **£8**
Wines from **£25 a bottle**

At the start, our delightful waiter announces that the menu here at Sam's Montpellier is "a little bit different". That's a four-word phrase guaranteed to strike fear into the heart of, well, me. What in God's name is going to happen in this sharp-edged restaurant in Cheltenham, where life is meant to be as unchallenging

as an episode of *Countryfile*? Am I going to have to lick a black pudding espuma from a plaster cast of the chef's lips? Will each dish be spoon fed to me while I'm forced to wear headphones and listen to a soundtrack of Jacob Collier telling me which key I'm masticating in? It's the middle of the jazz festival. It could happen. Oh no. It's worse than that, isn't it? It's going to be starters in a dog bowl and desserts off a trowel. I just know it.

She smiles broadly. "Here at Sam's, we have..." Pause. "A small plates concept. A bit like tapas." You do? Oh, you marvellous, dear, young person. And if that sounds like I'm being patronising all I can say is, how clever of you to notice. In this job you see things. Granted, restaurant reviewing isn't all attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion, and C-beams glittering in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate, but it can be challenging. So when someone threatens profound difference, sweaty-palmed trepidation is reasonable. And when that difference turns out to be something achingly familiar, so is relief.

Some of you, of course, are very much over small plates. We've talked about this, haven't we? In detail. You've had enough of a bit of this and that. Please can you have one of those main courses like restaurants used to do? So let's get the other infuriating details out of the way quickly. The hard grey walls of the various dining spaces combined with the thrumming soundtrack create an acoustic friendly only to younger ears. Naturally, the dishes turn up when they're ready, rather than in any particular order, like your spouse has said they'll make you a sandwich and a cuppa but only when they've finished what they're doing. Be grateful. Or be cross.

The rest of you, pay attention. Because if you let any of that put you off, you'd miss out on some larky, excitable and very jolly cooking. For many years Sam Price headed up the kitchen at a pub just outside Cheltenham, serving what was by all accounts good, reliable pub food. Nobody had to give speeches about things being a bit different because they weren't. Here, Price is having lots of fun. He's painting into the corners of the canvas; filling every frame of the movie. And it works.

The menu is divided into "Earth" for plant-based, "Land" for meat and "Sea" for fish. At each stage



Lamb shoulder has been shredded then formed into a fat cake, to go with a block of rösti – fried potato is always a good thing

Small wonders: (clockwise from left) lamb shoulder with rösti; the dining room; smoked salmon tart; braised pig cheek; baked custard tart with puffed rice granola; fruit jelly

something will be offered up deep-fried. What matters is how the fried thing is accessorised. There's popcorn fried chicken with chipotle ketchup from the land list, and from the sea section, monkfish "bites" with crushed peas and curried sauce. It's a dish for the middle classes, eager to signal they know what it is to be queuing up at the chippy, drunk and hungry after the pubs have chucked out. The earth section gets beetroot arancini with a light grassy poke of dill. Cut through the golden exterior and you'll find something brilliantly Hammer House crimson, like the very ground has bled for you. There's a lime mayo, to beat the beetroot sweetness into submission, and a huge grating of parmesan to remind you that these are balls of deep-fried risotto. Follow that with florets of cauliflower, bashed about with smoked paprika and caramelised, before being dressed in a buttery mess of pine nuts and fresh red chilli.

Meat dishes demand a cooking process. Fat pebbles of pig cheek are first braised until spoonable, then placed on a face-cream-soft purée of cannellini beans. There are

generous dribbles of a jammy madeira sauce and, on top for crunch, fragments of puffy crackling. Lamb shoulder has also been braised, this time until it can be shredded, then formed into a fat cake, to go with a golden block of rösti, because fried potato is always a good thing. There are crushed peas, a roasted carrot and good gravy. Small-plate refuseniks might squint at this dish and recognise, in its parts, a grown-up main course that has been tailored down to its £15 price tag. It's a fair point. It applies equally to a precise slice of smoked duck breast served pink, but with crisped skin, alongside charred broccoli. This could indeed be a main course if it was allowed to escape adolescence. By this point, however, we have given ourselves fully to the parade of the small but perfectly formed.

Here comes a tart of crumbly pastry filled with a hot-smoked salmon mousse and topped with shiny ribbons of cucumber. Here, too, is a sensitively cooked piece of hake smothered by a bisque which has been put through a nitrous gun, so it's all foamy and light. Now you're cross again, because you're also over foams. What matters is the underlying sauce, and this one is a belter. It's big on anise and the whack of fat, roasted prawn head. The only misfire is a pistachio parfait. It is the thrilling green of a pool table baize and it's deeply savoury, but my companions struggle to identify the key ingredient. Is it peas or avocado or blitzed Kermit? It's a pistachio parfait that doesn't taste of pistachio, but there's a pleasingly smoky char to the oily toast.

The dessert section is called "Heaven". You're not at all surprised by that, are you? A custard tart topped with a puffed rice "granola", which you'll spend the night picking out of your teeth, is not quite divine but it very much does the job. A light jelly full of plump berries is a palate cleanser. A dense rectangle of intense chocolate torte topped with an orange gel is a palate coater. Choose the order in which you eat those carefully. They have an enormous gin list, because it's Cheltenham and they like that sort of thing here, alongside a strong choice of unchallenging wines by the glass. Passing by you could mistake Sam's for one of those all-day brasseries, good for avocado on toast, stupid cocktails and an emotional best-friend debrief. But behind the high street crowd-pleaser vibe, behind the clatter and the groove, is a place serving dishes that deserve our attention, whatever the portion size. ■



Notes on chocolate

Contrasting bars for when you can't decide. By *Annalisa Barbieri*



It is the end of May. I don't know what I want, chocolate wise. Dark chocolate, milk chocolate, bits in my chocolate? Luckily, there is a bar from **Lumi** that satisfies an undecided palette: The Salted Pretzel (£6.75/100g). It has very generous chunks of salted pretzel (it's all there in the name) trapped amid swirls of caramelised white chocolate and dark. Depending on what bit you get it could be salty and very sweet or salty and not so sweet.

Peta, who makes the bars, likens it to a digestive biscuit in taste and, although I don't initially agree, I see what she means after I've tested vigorously. This bar has become a bestseller, but it was a bit too sweet for me, overall. However, it's worth a try if you want something a little different and fun.

Continuing this theme I've

inadvertently put myself on, for bars with layered profiles, I try Bristol-based **Ruby Hue's** 72% Rwenzori (Ugandan) Orange and Szechuan bar (£6.50/70g). This is a beautiful bar, delicate and delicious and the flavours unfold like a good story. The orange peel is there, but not overpowering, like a peak through a window and the pepper is very much back row, so no need for trepidation. I think it's a lovely taste for summer.

Then **Fossa's** 54% dark milk chocolate with Yuzu Sea Salt, (£8.95/50g). This has cocoa from Tanzania and wonderful, chewy, yuzu (an Asia citrus fruit) peel. This was unexpectedly delicious and one tasting square turned to three before I squirreled the whole bar away for later. It needs savouring, not least because of the cost. But it is very very, very good.

Wines of the week

Puglia's popular and fruit-packed wines span red, white and rosé.

By *David Williams*

@Daveydaibach



Paolo Leo Passitivo Primitivo Organic Appassimento Puglia, 2022
From £12.80,
ND John

Wines from Puglia seem to be a hit at the moment. So many friends and family have mentioned the region as their best recent vinous discovery – and wine merchants say they're selling better than any other Italian wine. There's an obvious explanation: Puglian reds offer rather a lot of rich, concentrated fruit for the money, with a natural sweetness (many have a level of sugar that takes them into off-dry territory) offset by a classic Italian tomato-or-plum-like tartness that makes them extremely good with tomato-based sauces and hard cheese. Many are made with the appassimento technique, with some or all of the wine made with dried grapes, bringing an extra level of figgy, dark chocolatey richness to a wine such as Paolo Leo's organic number.

Calcarius Nu Litr Rosso Puglia, NV
From £22, 1 litre,
Juiced Wines



The grape variety responsible for most Puglian reds in UK supermarkets is primitivo, genetically identical to Californian zinfandel. While many come in the kind of sweetly warming, plummy package offered by Asda's Extra Special Primitivo 2022 (£6.75, Asda), others go for a tangier, dry and, in terms of alcohol, lighter (13% rather than 14.5% or more) style, such as Cantine de Falco Primitivo Salento 2022 (£12.95, leaandsandeman.co.uk). Other good Puglian red varieties include negroamaro, which, like primitivo, is capable of making wines in a variety of styles, whether it's dark and spicy (San Marzano Il Pumo Negroamaro, Salento 2022, £10.95, strictlywine.co.uk) or the light, cherry-herby and thirst-quenching natural mode of 11.5% abv Calcarius Nu.

San Marzano Talo Verdeca Puglia, 2022
From £10.49,
All About Wine



While Puglia's reputation rests largely on its red wines, the region has other strings to its bow. In a world where rosé has eclipsed white in many drinkers' affections, winemakers – including Puglia producers – are feeling the need to add a pink wine to their ranges. Waitrose has just added two, both off-dry, with the juicy ripe Waitrose Loved & Found Organic Susumaniello Rosato 2023 (£7.99) my choice ahead of the creamy, soft Waitrose Loved & Found Aglianico Rosato 2023 (£8.99). The second of those is made from a variety, aglianico, I associate with wines from Campania and Basilicata – where I find most of my favourite southern Italian whites. Puglia, however, can do bianco, too, in wines such as San Marzano's unoaked version of the local verdeca, with its blossom, golden apple and easy freshness.



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Style Notebook

Fashion editor JO JONES

Update your look with these sunshine-ready pieces for the perfect summer capsule wardrobe

Etia dress
£170,
sezane.
com



T-bar necklace
£65, florence-
london.com



Gold gemstone necklace £168, astleyclarke.com



Sweatshirt
£190, essentiel-
antwerp.com

Trainers £120, New Balance
(net-a-porter.com)



Tote £75,
oliverbonas.
com



Dress
£275, wyse
london.com



Raffia belt
£9.99,
newlook.
com



Bermuda
shorts £40,
gap.co.uk



Buoy striped shirt
£225, yaitte.com



Denim blazer
£135, cos.com

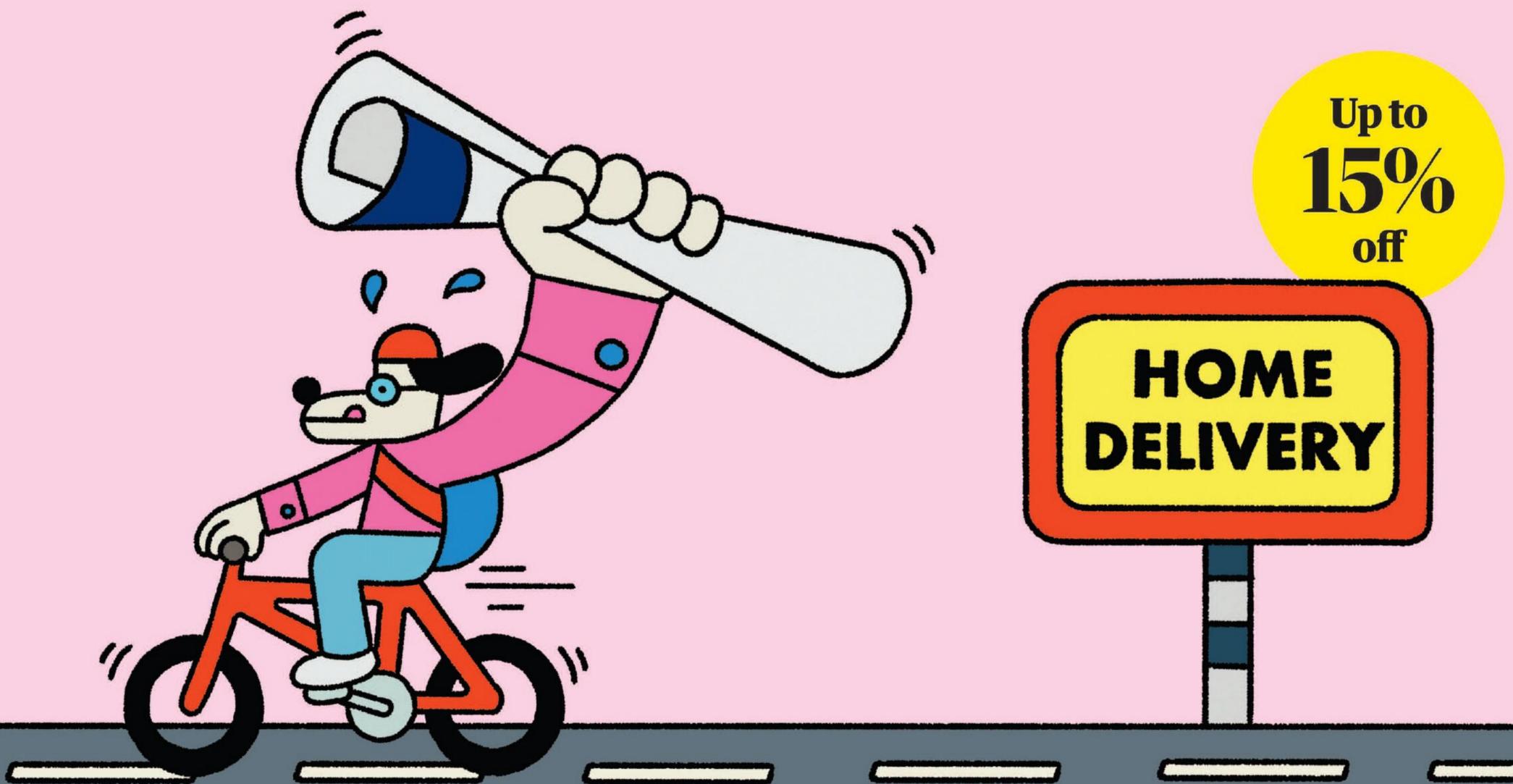


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Leather sandals £110, stories.com

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The Guardian | The Observer

Beauty Funmi Fetto



@FunmiFetto

Team grey hair with bold lips and eyes

Until quite recently, I'd wager that the automatic response to grey hair was, "Get rid of it now!" While, sadly, that hasn't shifted as far as I'd like, the growing embrace of grey hair as a thing of beauty is glorious to see. The key is to use the right hair products (Oribe and Davines have great products targeting grey hair) and the right makeup: strong brows, a rosy lipstick, defined eyes and a light-infused base. Because, while grey hair is fabulous, grey skin never is.

1. **Eyeiko Brow Gel** £18, eyeiko.co.uk
2. **Davines Alchemic Conditioner** £21.50, uk.davines.com
3. **Beauty Pie Keep This 4-Shade Eyeshadow Palette** from £12, beautypie.com
4. **Oribe Silverati Conditioner** £49, selfridges.co.uk
5. **Jones Road What the Foundation** £42, jonesroadbeauty.com
6. **Iliia Lip Sketch Hydrating Crayon** £26, iliabeauty.com



I can't do without...

A gentle toner that cleans your skin without stripping it

S'able Labs Black Seed Toner
£35 spacenk.com

A study came out some time ago about Britons not washing their faces properly. While, yes, there are people who can't be bothered to do more than splash their faces with water (I resist the urge to pass judgment), not washing your face properly is actually easily done. When we cleanse, we assume our faces are clean because isn't that the whole point of a cleanser? But over the years I have found that even great cleansers need help. That help comes in the form of a toner. The purpose of the old guard toners was to remove any last traces of makeup, dirt and excess oil. The problem was they were so chock-full of alcohol that the scent could revive the dead and the liquid itself was akin to paint stripper. Thankfully, today's toners – such as this incredible standout from S'able Labs – are a world apart. Like its predecessors, the Black Seed Toner eliminates the last traces of dirt and grime, but it also balances, brightens and resurfaces the skin without drying it to a husk. Ingredients include ferulic acid (an amazing antioxidant that targets discoloration), vitamin C (also great for brightening) and black seed, which refines skin texture. The blurb on the back of the bottle encourages you to spray it on your skin and leave it, but I actually prefer to wipe it off using a cotton pad. You'd be shocked at the amount of extra dirt that you'll see coming off your freshly cleaned skin.



On my radar

Three smart eye creams worth focusing on

Eyes right

Using a gentle but powerful retinol-like blend, this eye cream smoothes and evens the skin. It can be used all around the eyes and by those with sensitive skin. **Fresh Black Tea Advanced Age Renewal Eye Cream**, £60, spacenk.com



Brighter later

This effective vitamin C eye balm serum not only depuffs, minimises fine lines and brightens dark circles, it also comes in a clever, convenient-to-use stick form. **Dr.Jart+ Brightening Eye Stick**, £45, drjart.co.uk



One time only

An advanced eye cream clinically proven to reduce fine lines in one use? It's no wonder beauty insiders swear by this OG of cosmeceutical brands. **Dermatologica Phyto Nature Lifting Eye Cream**, £115, dermatologica.co.uk





How an Italian designer turned a tired one-bedroom art nouveau

‘Each little corner has a function’

Words **IFEOLUWA ADEDEJI**
Photographs **BARBARA CORSICO**

Manuela Merlo's house hunt finished almost as soon as it had begun. At her second house viewing, she found a 1920s ground-floor property in Turin that worked its magic. The one-bedroom art nouveau flat featured high ceilings and, at the back, an overgrown but fascinating garden. “When I first saw it the plants were covered with a blanket of snow and two cats were sleeping peacefully,” says Manuela. The tranquil scene was exactly what she was looking for. Located in the Crocetta district, the property is close to the city centre, but secluded enough not to be overwhelmed by the noise of nightlife activities. Manuela and her daughters Sveva, 16, and Costanza, 14, have now lived here for three years.

“When we bought the property in 2019, I had recently separated from my husband,” says Manuela. “I decided it was time for us to find a quiet place where we could put down roots. Fortunately, it is

within comfortable walking distance of their father’s house, school and friends.”

The previous owner had lived in the flat for more than 50 years. When he died, his daughter decided to sell. “The layout was a single open space with a bedroom and bathroom on the entry level,” says Manuela. “There was a distinct 1970s vibe with carpet everywhere, which we removed. However, I was keen to make the most of the beautiful garden and keep his trees and the roses that produced an intoxicating scent.”

Before putting in an offer, Manuela confirmed it would be possible to install a garden room that would connect the living area and the garden. The glazed lean-to was built by a local blacksmith and is the brightest space in the house. “It’s great being able to collect produce from our small vegetable garden in the spring and summer months, and cook it immediately,” she says.

Back in the house, the interiors are



flat in Turin into a modern but intimate space for her family

the result of her passion for design and natural materials. Vibrant rugs are displayed throughout the property, including on the bathroom and kitchen floors. "I love intimate atmospheres and I tried to create them in the house, giving life to many charming corners, each with its own function."

One such corner under the stairs features a Vitra Eames rocking chair and a String system bookcase. There's also a work area in the dining room with an original 1950s desk, computer, books and plants. The furnishings, textiles and assorted objects are a mix-and-match of design pieces, many from her own company, Pinkmartini, and some inherited from family and friends or found in vintage markets. "I managed to keep some furniture that came with the house, including the bed and a mirror in the bathroom," she says.

There's a new mezzanine area with glazed walls that allow light to spread



through the rooms. This space had been used as storage and was accessed via a flight of stairs, where the wall is now painted yellow. "The flight was L-shaped and took up lots of room," Manuela explains. "With the help of an architect friend we designed a set of straight, open-tread iron flights for the opposite wall." These lead up to Sveva and Costanza's bedrooms. The small and comfortable rooms have been designed to leave enough space for a large walk-in wardrobe on the same level.

Back downstairs in the Ikea kitchen area, a large vintage mirror is suspended on a tilt. "I wanted it to hang like this to give the bistro effect, but it also reflects the entire garden space, bringing nature into our home," Manuela explains. Above the IL-Wood & Co marble-topped peninsula hang two multicoloured ceramic pendants from Ferroluce Lighting and the floor is covered with a bold polyvinyl rug Manuela designed for Pinkmartini. "It was

Casa mia: (clockwise from far left) Vitra rocking chair beneath custom-made stairs; Ikea kitchen, and mezzanine; Manuela Merlo and friend by the garden; the stylish bathroom; a cosy corner of the kitchen; Manuela's bedroom with wallpaper on a roll

important to create a comfortable space for the girls throughout," she says.

The hand-printed Deborah Bowness wallpaper in the corridor sets the tone for the rest of the interiors – a considered mix of vintage and modern furniture offset by vibrant colours. "I've used wallpaper by the same designer in my bedroom, but I decided to hang the entire roll instead of pasting it to the wall."

Manuela has managed to establish balance and harmony – in a space of just 90sqm. "We exploited the high ceilings and were able to add an extra bathroom," she says. And it's peaceful, too: "I rarely need to escape to the mountains, as I often did in the past." ■



Nouvelle
Aquitaine

dream big
live slow

La Rochelle, Atlantic Coast © Loic Lagarde

Nouvelle-Aquitaine - south west France's top region for wine and more

A journey through wine vineyards, UNESCO gems, and timeless castles

Discover the beauty of Nouvelle-Aquitaine, home to the largest fine wine vineyard and stunning sites such as Bordeaux's UNESCO-listed area. Immerse yourself in the region's natural wonders by climbing Europe's tallest sand dune on the Atlantic Coast. Experience the rich cultural heritage of Aubusson tapestries near Limoges, with recent designs inspired by iconic fantasy worlds. Follow pilgrimage routes through the breathtaking Pyrénées, indulge in local delights and exceptional tastings in Cognac and Basque country in Biarritz. Or time travel back to the Middle Ages and visit the valley of 1001 castles in the heart of the Dordogne Valley.



Vineyards of Jurançon © Pau Pyrénées Tourisme D.Guilhamasse-CRTNA

Exploring the regions history, culture, and natural beauty

Make the most of this spring and summer with the region's 7,000km of cycle paths, which will take you through a whirlwind of emotions and unparalleled journeys. A blend of history and culture that will transport you to a world where past and present converge, inviting you to witness the region's unforgettable landmarks first-hand.

Learn the poignant history of the French resistance in the martyred village of Oradour-sur-Glane and discover where impressionists, like Monet, took their inspiration from around the Painters' Trail in the Creuse Valley. Engage in hands-on experiences, like crafting wooden barrels with coopers, exploring vineyards on e-bike rides or 2CV excursions around one of the largest cognac brands, Rémy Martin, who sets the standard for eco-conscious practices in France.

With its lush and rolling scenery, filled with

bastides, one-of-a-kind châteaux, mills and traditional villages, Nouvelle-Aquitaine is also home to one of the biggest biosphere reserves in the world in the Dordogne Valley. Admire its medieval village perched on the rocky promontory where the Dordogne and Ceou rivers come together like a jewel in a crown, gleaming with its historical charm and stunning natural surroundings.

Then escape south of the region to the picturesque Pau-Pyrénées and witness the age-old tradition of shepherds guiding their flocks to lush mountain pastures and dive into its fascinating history in the Béarn capital where King Henry IV was born.

Embracing its Community

From the village squares to the cobbled lanes, experience the vibrant pulse of spring and summer in Nouvelle-Aquitaine, where buzzing food and night markets awaken the entire region. These markets are not just places to shop, but social gatherings where the community comes together to celebrate fresh produce, culinary expertise, and a spirit of togetherness.

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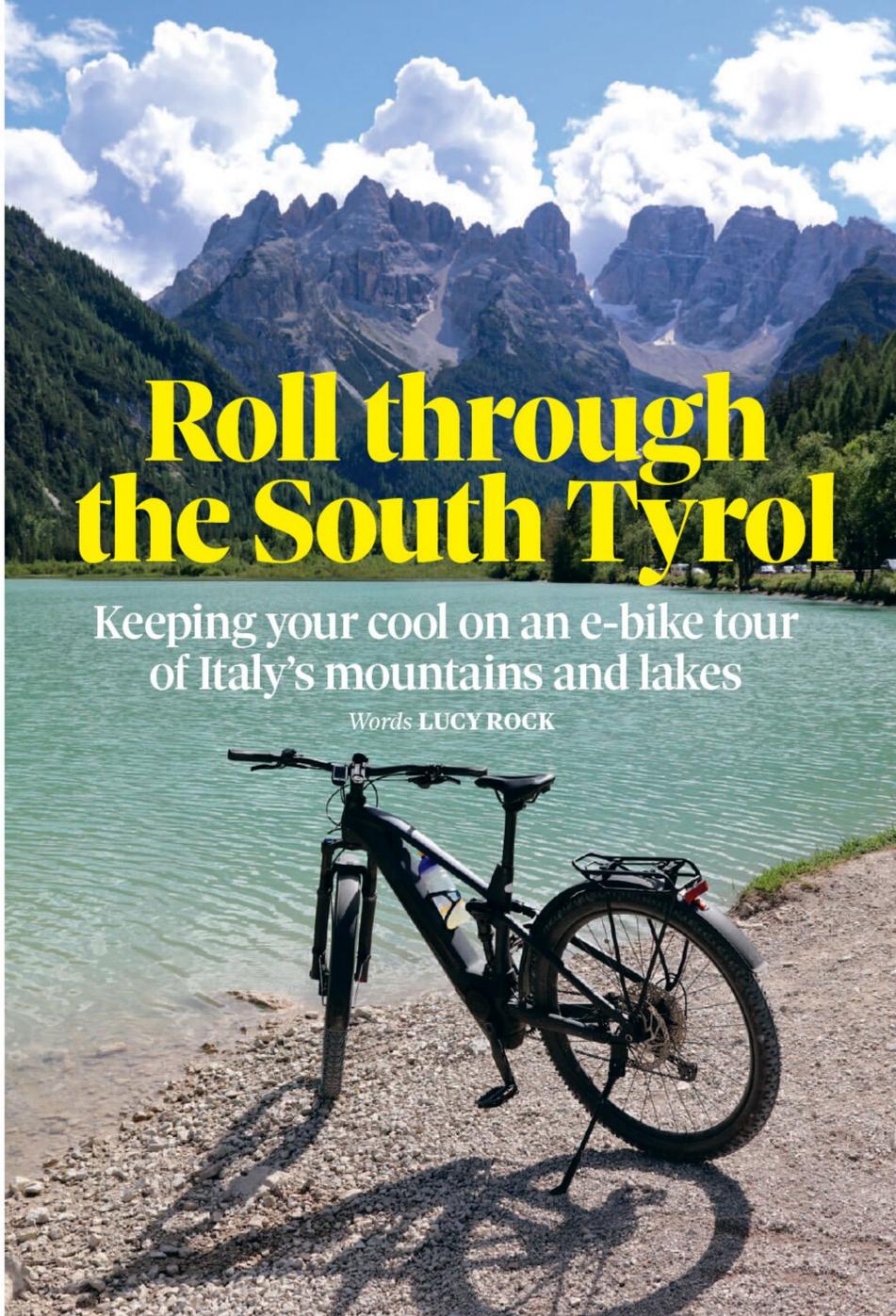
La Rochelle, Atlantic Coast © Salt In Our Hair-CRTNA



Try a tasting in Cognac © BNIC-CRTNA

brittanyferries.com/nouvelle-aquitaine

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Roll through the South Tyrol

Keeping your cool on an e-bike tour of Italy's mountains and lakes

Words LUCY ROCK

Bikini to swimsuit. Factor 15 to 50. Paperback to Kindle. The answers to my holiday prep questions have changed over time, but this year there was one extra decision: pedal bike or electric?

I was off on a four-day cycling tour in the South Tyrol with my 16-year-old daughter. Her idea of a holiday errs more towards Instagrammable moments involving beach sunsets and flower-shaped ice-creams. Pedalling up hills in 30C was a much harder sell.

A friend suggested we hire e-bikes.



What a cop-out, I thought. How wrong I was. These eco-beauties transformed our 30-40km trips from grumble-filled endurance tests to enjoyable jaunts with plenty of puff left for bonding chit-chat as we rode. E-cycling still feels like a workout. You're pedalling and pumping out endorphins, but on full throttle, steep gradients melt away and it's as though you're riding on the flat.

And so it turns out that e-biking along lanes bordered by grapevines and apple trees, with pit stops at a winery for a glass of freshly pressed juice (or Müller-Thurgau in my case), or at a lake for a cooling dip, is very appealing to teenagers – and their mothers. As is arriving at your destination hotel, lying by the pool in the late afternoon sun and looking forward to an evening of pizza, pasta and gelato after all that fresh air and exercise.

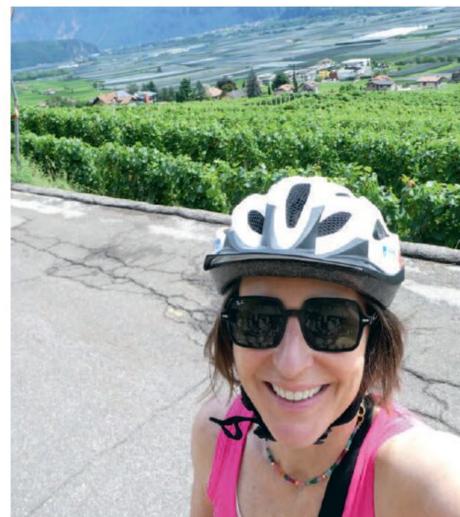
At the start of our tour we enjoyed a day in Bolzano, which boasts a blend

of cultures with centuries of Germanic, Austrian and Italian influences at play. The coolest man in town is Ötzi the Iceman who, at around 5,300 years old, is Europe's oldest mummy (cue "He's even older than you, Mum" jokes). He lies in a refrigerated cell in the South Tyrol Museum of Archeology, the star of a fascinating exhibition displaying his clothes and tools, and explaining his way of life, which ended violently with an arrow in the shoulder blade – a real Paleolithic murder mystery.

Afterwards, we threaded through ancient streets, past elaborate fountains, the 12th-century shopping arcades and the cathedral with its mosaic roof, winding up at the cable car station. A gondola whisked us up to Soprabolzano, a high plateau above the city where we feasted on (wonderfully Instagrammable) ice-cream and panoramic views.

Day two saw some serious e-biking

Pedal power: (clockwise from top) e-biking in the South Tyrolean mountains; Lake Caldaro, perfect for a dip; Lucy Rock near the River Adige; and cosmopolitan Bolzano



along undulating vine-clad hills, heading south through quaint villages to Termeno. We stopped at Lake Caldaro, the warmest and largest bathing lake in the region, to float on our backs and admire the jagged majesty of the Dolomites.

Termeno (or Tramin) is steeped in wine. The gewürztraminer grape is named after it (tip: pair the wine with a punchy blue cheese). Our digs were along the road from the Gothic, 86m-tall church tower, at the Gasthof Goldene Traube, a restaurant with rooms above.

On day three we took a circular route along designated cycle paths, much of it along the River Adige. Just as we arrived at the medieval market town of Egna late morning, the heavens opened. Diving into the nearest café, we whiled away a convivial hour or so, tucking into comforting bowls of canederli (bread dumplings) filled with speck and Graukäse cheese in a beef broth – a South Tyrolean speciality.

The next morning as the train carrying us to Verona cut through the mountains, we marvelled not only at their splendour, but how easily we might have tackled them. *Viva la bici elettrica!* ■

Inntravel (inntravel.co.uk) offers the Apples & Vines cycling holiday from £985pp based on two people sharing, with four nights' B&B accommodation, one dinner, bike hire and maps. E-bike hire from £28pp, until 31 July and 13 August to 15 October 2024

In the saddle

Three more cycle tours through the Italian countryside



Tuscany On this eight-day adventure you can e-bike or cycle through the olive groves of Tuscany, starting in Florence and ending in Pisa, cycling around its

famous leaning tower. On the way, there are stops in Vinci, birthplace of Leonardo, and the city of Lucca, with its tree-lined pathways that are perfect for cyclists, soaking up stunning views of Tuscany's beautiful Garfagnana valley on the way. Holidays for seven nights/eight days start from £1,800, including meals, transport and accommodation. *For more details, go to intrepidtravel.com*

Puglia Cycle through Italy's heel, known for its whitewashed hill towns, baroque churches and white sandy beaches. Highlights include the trulli houses



of Alberobello and the 'white city' of Ostuni. From £1,369 for a seven-night self-guided tour, including accommodation. *For more details, see headwater.com*

Sardinia A self-guided e-bike tour of Costa Smeralda, taking in coastal towns, remote villages and some of Europe's best secluded beaches. Even better, you can enjoy this stunning coastline on routes that are relatively car free.



Seven nights with hand-picked hotels, three evening meals and luggage transfer between hotels, from £1,925. *For details, go to cycling-for-softies.co.uk*

Self & wellbeing

Illustration EVA BEE

Music helps you get fit – but the right mix of tunes will keep you coming back for more...

Words JOEL SNAPE

Anyone who's ever hefted a dumbbell or laced up a running shoe understands that music, on some level, makes the process more enjoyable. That's why tunes and training are a hit combination: there are playlists, classes and even entire fledgling genres promising to help you push for the burn.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways music can help you mid-workout. First, by helping you dissociate from any discomfort you're experiencing and, second, by improving the quality of the training itself. The former seems to work especially well for long, slow efforts.

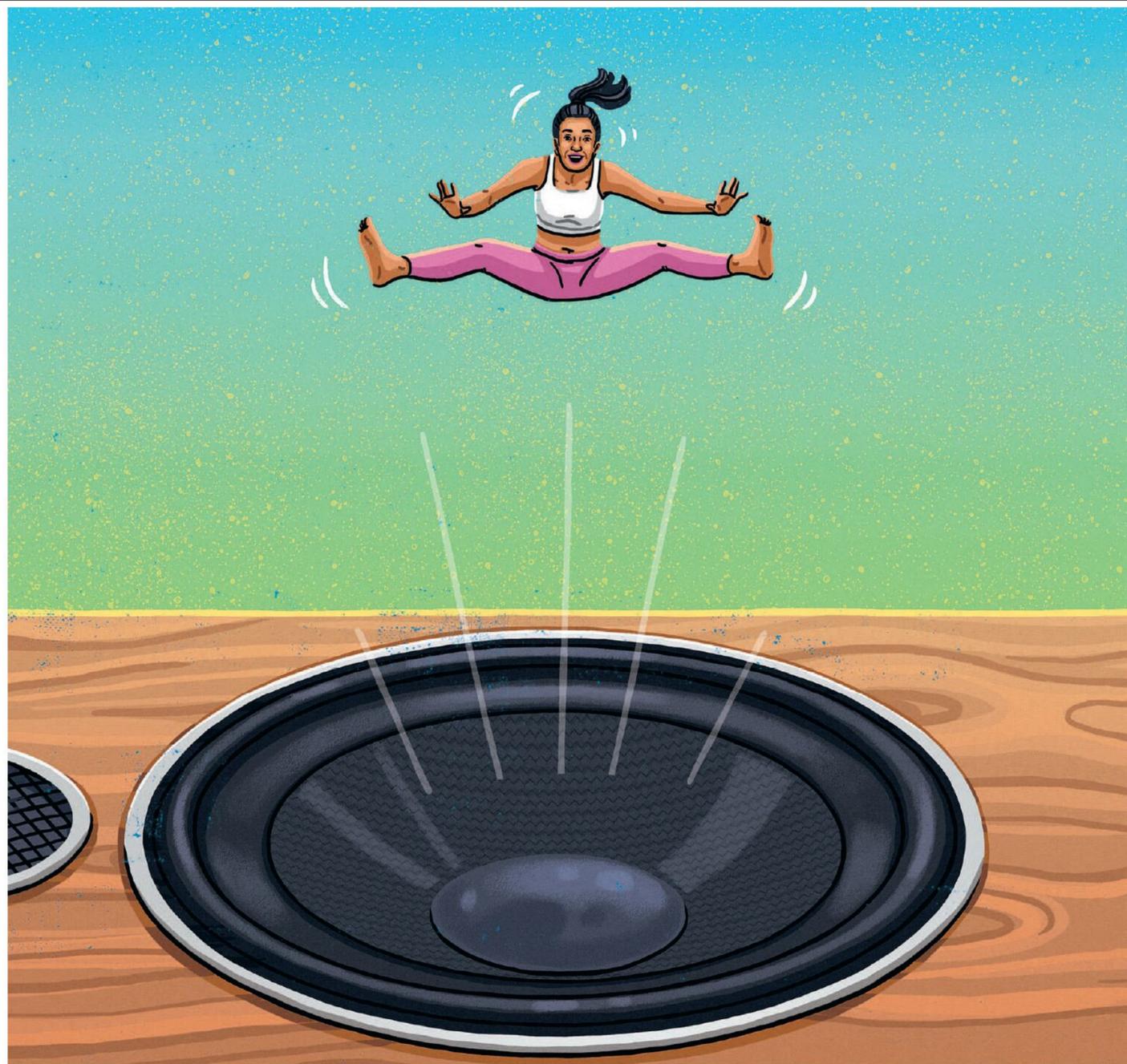
"Let's say you're going on a run," says Dr Matthew Stork, a research scientist who studies the effects of music on training, "and there are lots of what we call 'interoceptive' cues happening – your muscles are sore, your heart rate's going up, you're sweating, and so on. Music shifts your attentional focus away from those things, reducing your perceived exertion."

But you might not even need anything tuneful on your headphones for these effects to kick in. "The introduction of other common audio formats has really shaken up our knowledge of how we think about music and exercise," says Dr Christopher Ballman, associate professor of kinesiology at the University of Alabama. "There are individuals now who will perform better listening to podcasts or even audio books – these help people dissociate from discomfort."

As you up the intensity, the unpleasantness becomes tougher to ignore – but here, music might help you to push through. "What we've found in supermaximal tests – where volunteers are basically pushing themselves as hard as they possibly can – is that power output goes up with music," says Stork. "In those efforts, it seems to be more beneficial as a motivational tool. Think about a piece like Darude's Sandstorm – we've seen that just the anticipation of the beat drop can influence how ready you are for exercise."

As for how music can actually *improve* your workout, improvements in technology have made this easier to quantify. "We now know that music influences not just our heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate, but also electrical activity in the brain," says Costas Karageorghis, professor in sport and exercise psychology at Brunel University. "A good analogy might be that if you're running and every time you get to a junction, you encounter a green light, that would be the same as working out synchronously with music – if you're listening to music out of time, or don't have any music at all, it's like constantly stopping at red lights. You're juddering along, out of pace."

For cardio-style workouts, an optimal workout tempo is 120-140BPM (beats per minute) for most people, where it's likely to match the heart rate they experience. At the same time, at least one study suggests that



'Your muscles are sore, your heart rate's going up, you're sweating – music shifts your focus away from your exertion'

we spontaneously modify our cadence to match the tempo of the music we're listening to, suggesting that differently paced tunes might help runners or rowers change their pacing.

Rhythm is also important. "A predictable, not-too-complex musical rhythm seems to work best," says Karageorghis. "Classical music and rock, for instance, are often characterised by *rallentandos* and *accelerandos* – basically, slowing down and speeding up – which isn't very good if you're trying to synchronise your performance with the beat."

Rhythmic workouts, rock and classical music also share what researchers call "iconic cues". "These are a way of conjuring imagery through the nature of the music," says Karageorghis. "So if you take something like Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*, that might conjure images of transcendence and overcoming adversity – whereas a piece like Eye of

the Tiger has a guitar riff that comes at you like a boxer's jab and encourages you to match that intensity."

You'd also expect Survivor's masterful wordplay to play a part – but the role of lyrics is one of the least well-understood elements of music's effects. "In a study that we've recently completed, but not yet published, we asked volunteers to pick their favourite music for a weightlifting effort, then asked them to listen to either a regular or instrumental version," says Ballman. "We didn't really see any differences in actual performance, but people enjoyed the session more and were more motivated, if they were listening to the lyrical version."

"During our formative years, we tend to form quite secure bonds with certain music and lyrics that we personally find meaningful," says Karageorghis. "And so a particular song can be very individual, but there can also be pieces of music that through peer group influence or sheer cultural impact can have a powerful bearing on our psychology. It's really about matching the person to the situation, the intensity and the mode of exercise."

All of this brings us to the crucial point that playlists, personal trainers and spin instructors often miss: workout music works much better if you actually like

Some will perform better listening to podcasts or audiobooks

it. “We’ve published around 15 papers now, which show that if you don’t like the music being played, you perform worse – in some cases worse than you would with no music at all,” says Ballman.

In fact, maybe the most important thing music can do is make the entire *experience* of working out more enjoyable – independent of any personal bests you set or aching legs you experience. That’s crucial, because enjoying workouts might be the best way to make them a permanent part of your life.

“Until recently, scientists were trying to apply a form of science known as cognitivism to getting people engaged in physical activity – asking them to think about the benefits,” explains Karageorghis. “But there’s a scientific movement towards promoting hedonism as a more modern approach to getting people to habitually engage in physical activity – making sure they enjoy

Music plays a huge part in people enjoying what they are doing

what they’re doing and music can play a huge part in that.”

Maybe the best thing any coach can do is cater to their clientele: not just to hype them up, but to keep them coming back. “You have to know when to go slow and when to go high,” says Sophie Ritchie, creator of ballet-inspired workout Disco Barre. “We

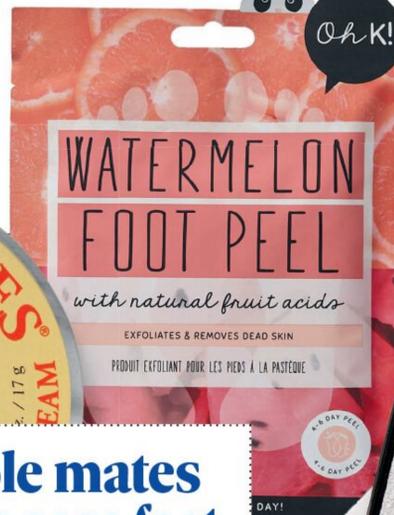
play a mix of underground disco, house, boogie, funk, pop, Balearic, Italo and acid – if you can do it right, people forget how hard they’re working.” Other trainers take recommendations directly from their trainees. “My clients are all of a certain age and my playlists tend to be based on music from when they were younger,” says Feel Good Fitness coach Susannah Simmons. “It helps motivate them and also gets conversation going – while newer music tends to have the opposite effect.”

So you just need to find a class that lets you listen to Metallica’s One and you’re sorted? Perhaps not: some research suggests overfamiliarity can mute the buzz any one song gives you. “I look at familiarity with music as a sort of inverted-U principle,” says Stork. “You’re probably not going to get to an optimal state to work out from hearing a piece of music once or twice, but once you’ve heard something on the radio a thousand times, it’s not going to elicit the same emotional response any more. So there may be a kind of sweet spot.”

There’s one final wrinkle here, which is the question of whether there are times it’s better to turn off the music – or leave the headphones at home entirely. “If your goal is to keep an easy pace or complete a recovery run, music could get in the way,” says Brady Holmer, a researcher at examine.com and sub-three-hour marathon runner. “Headphones can remove the feedback from your steps and your breathing rate, so you might not perceive effort correctly. Listening to songs that motivate you or with a tempo that’s too fast can also push you to run faster than you’d like. I save my music playlists for hard or fast workouts and listen to podcasts or audiobooks – if anything at all – for my easy runs.”

For most workouts, then, keep things fairly simple: choose music you like, keep the rhythms simple and the tempo moderately high. Save a few favourite songs for tougher efforts – in theory, you’ll come to associate them with the fun and endorphin rush of a good workout. Above all, remember that maybe the most powerful thing music can do isn’t push you to do a bit better in one individual workout, but keep you coming back again and again. ■

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Séamas O'Reilly

A crime of sorts has been committed. But it's an even bigger one to blame the dog

@shockproofbeats



If ever you land near death's door, you may find yourself scrolling the options for non-human reincarnation. A noble eagle, perhaps, or a river dolphin; a mountain goat, or a stolid little bumblebee. Your best bet would be to come back as one of my father's dogs. Free of human responsibility, you'll still reap many of civilisation's core benefits, like living indoors, eating cooked meals and watching *Loose Women*.

Moreover, you will know the love of humankind, for Annie and Dougie – his beautiful but large and needy Labradors – are my father's most ardent objects of affection and his favourite topic of conversation. They are also, I should add, his favourite conversational partners. Sometimes, while talking to him this week, I've caught his face screwing up in resentment as he realises that he is reduced to speaking to a person. Most of all, he is their indefatigable advocate on those occasions

when I speak calumny against them.

'Dougie did it!' I told him, as he immediately assumed high dudgeon. 'I have seen no evidence of this,' he exclaimed, all but donning a powdered wig and silk robe.

My brother, Dara, and I were back in Derry for a few days to keep my father company while my sister and her husband were away. We had a lovely few days, blighted only by a certain sordid crime. I'd ordered some chess pieces to the house as a gift for my brother-in-law, Jimmy. This was because his beautiful set – decimated after innumerable games between him and my son – is missing seven pieces.

On the day of their arrival, a quick look outside revealed that the postman, presumably well used to the ogreish hounds that blight his daily route, had not brought the parcel straight to the door, but discarded it and run away, quite possibly laying down suppressive fire from a machine gun as he retreated.

When I got to the parcel it

had been thoroughly ripped to shreds. On bringing the soggy wreckage indoors, it was clear that a single brown rook was missing. It was then I started pointing fingers and found that I, and not Dougie, was in the dock.

'He ate it!' I cried. 'Douglas would never do that,' my dad maintained, as if it was he who stood accused of tearing open a package with his teeth and not the bear-sized dog who has, in recent memory, eaten shoes, pillows and a handbag.

My father stared me down, resolute. I'd crossed a line. Dougie looked at him and then me. It's cheap to presume I can read the emotions of a dog's face, but were I to hazard a translation of his hand-dog expression it would be, 'I ate it, and I'd do it again.'

I retired from the stand. Some battles cannot be won in court. But I am confident that there will come, a day or two from now, a bark of pain and a plink of wood, when the truth – and rook – will out. I've made my piece heard. In the end, so too shall Dougie.

Ask Philippa

I have a great job and family, but I really want to write novels



@Philippa_Perry



Sunday with...

Author Harlan Coben on dogs and city strolls

Are Sundays special? No.

I don't have a nine to five, so I don't live my life waiting for the weekends. I try to do a bit of writing first thing in a notepad, while my wife grabs a Sunday newspaper.

Sunday shopping? We're in New York City. One of our favourite things is to go to the Grand Bazaar on 77th and Columbus. It's half junk, half cool stuff. It's like going on a museum trip – you never know what you'll see.

They literally sell anything: old containers of Tic Tacs, soaps you'd want to eat. And it all takes place in a school and they have food stands in the playground. If you walk along Columbus, you pass Japanese, Italian, Indian, Thai and American restaurants. I'll sit outside, because I'll have the dogs – Winslow and Laszlo – with me.

Any shopping mishaps?

They literally sell anything: old containers of Tic Tacs, soaps you'd want to eat. And it all takes place in a school and they have food stands in the playground. If you walk along Columbus, you pass Japanese, Italian, Indian, Thai and American restaurants. I'll sit outside, because I'll have the dogs – Winslow and Laszlo – with me.

Time for walkies? Yes, through Central Park. I like to enter at 72nd Street, Strawberry Fields, to see the John Lennon memorial

and the buskers. There's a fountain, like the one from *Friends*, and Bow Bridge, which you've seen in a million movies, like *Elf*.

Sunday lunch? Freeman's on 72nd Street does the best Reuben sandwiches. I'll walk down towards the zoo or up towards the Met. New York City is a great city for walking.

Sunday evening? I love getting lost in a good book or TV series. I'm not much of a sports fan, but both of my local teams – the New York Knicks and the New York Rangers – are doing well in the playoffs. So I'm watching a fair amount of that.

Do you ever switch off? No. Even on vacation, I write. Life is all about balance: your partner, your kids, how you eat, exercise and work. I can have all those things going well, but if I'm not writing, I know the balance isn't going to hold. **Rich Pelley**

Harlan Coben's latest novel, Think Twice, is out now (£22, Century). Buy it for £19.36 at guardianbookshop.com



The question I have a husband and a toddler I adore, and I have the dream job. But although the job is a dream on paper, I am finding myself unhappy in it. Now that I have the perfect career, after finally completing my PhD, having delayed it for maternity, it is somehow disappointing. I am seeing a therapist, but we are early on, and I want the happiness to come faster.

The problem as I see it is that what I really want to do is creative writing; I want to write novels. This is very different from all my scientific and maths education, so I am not very qualified for it. I am fearful of failure and of my writing being poor. It seems impossible that I could ever be successful. It also feels impossible to fit it in around my child and life and work.

But I also know I will never write a book if I don't start. When I am writing I feel finally fulfilled in a way I do not at any other point in my life – except maybe when I am reading a really good book. My family is dependent on my salary alone and we want a second baby soon, so it never seems like the right time to spend more time writing or take time off to do something so frivolous. But it's what I want to do with my life. What should I do?

Philippa's answer Never label your calling as frivolous. You've got to write. Why do we put off the things that we really want to do and mean the most to us? It's not because we're too busy or lazy, but it's often because of our fear of failure. Fear of failure equals procrastination. It can prevent you from even getting started. If you believe your performance says something about who you are as a person, putting off starting can feel like self-protection – it isn't, it is self-sabotage. For the moment, forget labels like "successful" or "unsuccessful".

A student asked the late David Young MP, how you get started in the career you want. Young said to him: "Have good ideas." The student asked: "How do you have good ideas?" Young replied, "Experience." The student asked "How do you get experience?" Young answered: "Have bad ideas."

It may seem counterintuitive at first, but Young's words are gold. Mistakes, failures and setbacks are how we learn what works. It is through our missteps

and errors that we gain experience and give ourselves a chance of success. You've learned the dream job isn't the dream job – you needed to experience it to know that.

Disappointments, rejections, failures and setbacks don't define you, but your courage does. Start writing and fail. Fail again, embrace your mistakes, learn from them. If you are failing, you are doing something and if you are doing something you are giving yourself a chance of fulfilling your wishes, hopes and dreams, and that's important.

It feels as if you have no time – but you must do this

Start to write. Make mistakes. Learn from them. Do this for you

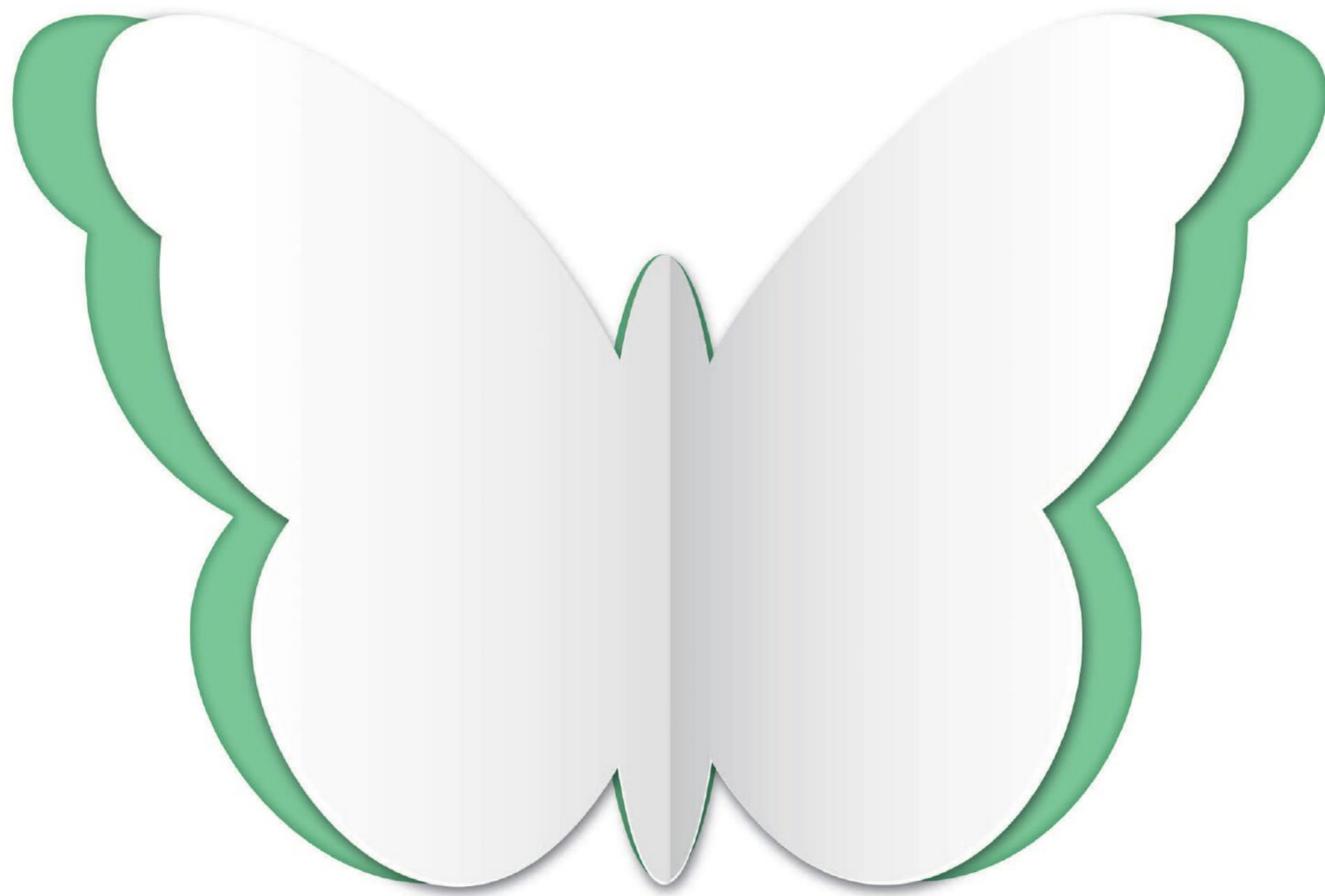
for you, so get up very early in the morning and just write. You will get interrupted, babies will require your attention. Write at work, 20 minutes every lunch time. These times are holding strategies for now. You're practising. Don't judge what you write. Don't think of what you are writing now as something that must be finished. You are in training. Soon (although it will feel like forever before it happens) your children will sleep until 7.30am. You will have 90 minutes every morning. You may even manage one evening a week at a writing workshop. When the babies become children, every year you'll go on a writing retreat while they're with their father or granny. Your first drafts will fail, then you edit. You'll make your failures better. Something big will begin to take shape. You'll hone it, trim it, reorder it, you'll sacrifice the bits of it you liked best for the sake of the whole and someone from one of your writing retreats will recommend you to an agent, who'll recommend you to another and eventually you'll get your first deal and by your third deal you'll give up the day job. Well, that's the idea anyway.

The courage to fail is the same courage you need to succeed, so welcome failure. If you are not failing, you're not trying, so keep failing. I couldn't get an agent for my first book. It took me five years to find a publisher. In the end I got one who had initially rejected me. I got no advance. I took every opportunity I had to promote it, even giving talks in bookshops to just five people. In the end I got an agent, I got better deals, I wrote and sold some more books, but I could never have achieved that without failing and failing again.

You are in a hurry, but take your time. The future – your future – will arrive soon enough. Stay in the present, make the most of the children and that job you are not enjoying, but never let go of your dreams, and each day take one small step towards them. When you do that, you are doing something: you are investing in hope.

Recommended reading: *How to Fail* by Elizabeth Day and *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron ■

➔ **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



PAPER & BIODIVERSITY

Forests cover 31% of the world's total land area and contain most of the world's earthly biodiversity. To ensure the long-term health of forests, the European paper industry counts on sustainable forest management as a source for its main raw material.

Source: FAO and UNEP, The State of World's Forests, 2020



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