

27 OCTOBER 2024

The Observer Magazine

Feel it in your bones

More than half the women in the UK
over 50 will suffer a fracture.
But with more awareness – and
some heavy lifting – can we take
the pain out of osteoporosis?



Conspiracy watch
Marianna Spring
on being the BBC's
most hated woman

Rob Beckett
'All comedians are
broken – it's what
drives us to achieve'

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Tracy Chevalier
The author's guide
to the hidden Venice
you never see

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The Observer Magazine



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Tracy Chevalier is the author of 11 novels, including *A Single Thread*, *Remarkable Creatures* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*,



a bestseller that's sold 5m copies and been made into a film, play and opera. This week, she gives her inside tips on Venice, where her latest novel is set (p35).



Designer and illustrator **Matt Chase** is based in the United States. He began his career in advertising and established his own independent practice

which, to his huge surprise, is still going a decade later. Working across various media, including photography, drawing and sculpture, his images are witty and eye-catching, as you can see on the cover and p8.

Hayley Myers worked in the music industry for a decade before joining the *Observer Magazine* as an assistant. In this week's issue, she interviews the comedian Rob Beckett. As someone



who loves a good spreadsheet, Hayley was perplexed by the fact the standup's entire routine was scribbled on a single notepad page (p18).



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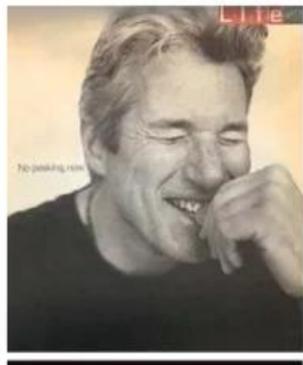
Cover image Matt Chase

Eva Wiseman

Skincare for tweens is booming. But they already look perfect...



@evawiseman



From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

'What is it about Richard Gere?' the *Observer* asked in 1998, when a slightly prickly encounter between Hollywood's 'most famous Buddhist' and journalist William Leith seemed to rattle Gere's zen composure.

Gere was unnerved when Leith attended two group interviews promoting *Red Corner*, his latest film. "You again," he said, looking definitely put out. I sat down. He eyed me cagily. When it came to their one-to-one, 'there was a flash of intense discomfort in his eyes. He made a comment accusing me of following him around, which I was.' Leith was nervous, too, recalling that in one previous interview with *Ladies' Home Journal*, when asked about being a 'sex object', Gere reportedly 'took out his Johnson'.

There seemed little risk of that; though Gere's sexual charisma was undeniable, on and off-screen. In his films, he both wore and removed clothes beautifully ('no awkward moments'), his physicality a crucial part of his acting. 'Posturing,

vulnerable, helplessly aggressive, he looks good having sex.' At the press junkets, Gere seemed to be sealed in a 'bubble of feline grace', exuding poise and, above all, control, discussing his work and his faith.

But for all that emollient elegance, Leith felt 'something is eating him up'. He could not work out what it might be: Gere offered no great revelations. Acting was 'a mysterious process'; he ran to keep fit and hadn't eaten meat for 25 years. He didn't want to talk about his youthful drug use and refused to expand on his claim of shyness. He wouldn't even say if he rented furniture in LA ('It's not interesting'). Leith didn't push it ('Ask too much and he might go for the Johnson'), concluding Gere was a vulnerable man 'who is uneasy with himself'.

Their nil-nil draw concluded. Gere smiled and shook Leith's hand 'as if I were a great friend'. Elegant to the end, 'the Johnson never came out'.

Emma Beddington

I didn't see the aurora, but I tried. At 10 or 11pm, I looked out of my bedroom window and squinted, and saw only darkness, but even so I found some lovely pleasure in it. The knowledge that something was happening in the sky, that all along my road people were standing in their gardens and angling their cameras towards the same big tree, and afterwards scrolling to see what they'd caught, sharing them on the street WhatsApp at midnight with pride. The next day, news sites reported on the northern lights as if they were young women getting out of cars – they "stunned", "radiant". I liked the way we were all united briefly in our lazy pursuit of beauty.

Elsewhere in my life, the search for beauty feels more treacherous. My daughter, 10 years old, went to a birthday party last week where she told me every other gift her little friend opened was a bottle of moisturiser. It should not have been a surprise, perhaps, having read about the rise of the "baby and child skincare market", expected to reach \$380m in market volume by 2028, but still, I found myself oddly troubled. I am fully and intimately aware of the lure of skincare, both the appeal of a daily routine (whether three or 15 steps, whether retinol or oil) and the sense it can give us of control in a time of chaos, but alongside that the capitalist creep, the repackaging as self-care, skincare as a kind of psychic protection, is something I know young girls might find particularly appealing. What troubled me the most in this instance, though, was the realisation that while my daughter and her friends are fully versed in the language of "body positivity", understanding, for example, that diversity is a good thing and that fat bodies aren't unhealthy, no such movement has really broken through about skin. In fact, as beauty journalist Jessica DeFino stresses, diet culture has been replaced by skincare culture.

This week, *New York Magazine* ran a piece about teenage boys' skincare routines. For instance, 15-year-old Rex ends the day by massaging a cleanser with moisturising water-lily extract into his cheeks, before applying Rile Face Hydrator, a lightweight emollient, or CeraVe's heavier Night Cream, finishing with a slick of Vaseline on his lips. The market-research firm Mintel recently reported that nearly 70% of gen Z men use skincare products, often new specialised brands with "playful names: Rile, Insanely Clean, Dr Squatch". This rise coincides with an increase in young people being diagnosed with acne worldwide. According to a new study published in the *British Journal of Dermatology*, rates in the UK are among the highest globally.

But that's not to say more young people have acne today – what it means is, more are seeking treatment for it, and purchasing creams they've seen on TikTok. Is it working? *Dazed Beauty* quotes James Hamblin, author of *Clean: The New Science of Skin and the Beauty of Doing Less*, who argues that a major contributing factor to acne is, in fact, the overuse of products. Real skincare, he says, would be investing in public health – in parks, rather than serums. "As we change our worlds, we

change our bodies," he writes. "The old duality between environmental health and human health is obsolete."

I don't know. If my daughter and her tween friends were getting excited about makeup, rather than skincare, I think I'd find it less disturbing. The fantasy, the dressing up, the transformation, the glitter, the rinsing it all off at night-time and starting again in the morning. Instead, I fear their attraction to perfection. There's never been more pressure to have perfect skin, and by perfect, oddly, I mean skin like theirs. Skin that hasn't seen more than 10 summers, that appears poreless and wrinkle-free, dewy, a forehead that reflects the classroom light. And if your skin can't be perfect, then it must at least be good – this is perhaps one of the last spaces in which appearance can still be merrily summarised as good or bad, bad being flawed, meaning pigmented, or spotty, or dry, or loose, and bad implying as well, at best poor health, at worst immorality.

These are the body-image lessons dripping from the internet through tweens' relationships with skincare, at the same time that they're learning about algebra, puberty, the ex-boyfriends of Taylor Swift. To embrace skincare is to grow up, is to embrace vigilance, shame and anxiety, is to start seeing yourself in not just a mirror but on a screen, is to be part of something larger. Maybe buying the moisturiser at 10 years old is not about beauty so much as survival.

The thing about the aurora borealis last week, of course, was that while we all looked up into the sky to witness this magic, this rare moment when milky streaks of purple and green appeared behind our neighbours' rooftops, for most of us it was only really visible when mediated through our phones. The cameras saw what our eyes could not and, like youth or beauty, it was fleeting and shimmered, and became more real as it was shared. There was community in this, but a sense of detachment, too, as if perhaps, even though we were constantly looking up, constantly trying to reach for beauty, there must be far, far more we were missing. ■

One more thing...

As the last woman to see *The Substance* (Demi Moore's shocking new body horror thriller), I am sorely tempted to splash out on The Standard's Halloween package – called 'Witch, Please!'. This is the hotel in London's Kings Cross with interiors uncannily similar to those in the film,

and they're embracing it wholeheartedly until 3 November, with immersive experiences and various tricks and treats. Dare I?

Greggs is launching its first Champagne bar. Finally! Drinks will include a £75 glass of Louis Roederer Cristal and signature cocktails inspired by Greggs' products. My favourite April Fool's promotions are always the ones that appear in October.

NEXT





This much I know

Chris Eubank Jr, boxer, 35

Interview **RICH PELLEY**
Photograph **PETER TARRY**

I had a very different upbringing to most people because of how eccentric and famous my father was. I remember a scene from *At Home with the Eubanks* when my father was in the kitchen. I walked in not expecting him to be there and ran straight back out of the room. People said it was funny, but it said a lot about my relationship with him.

My father was strict. At times I was afraid of him. He was a disciplinarian in the strongest sense of the word. But I needed that. I got into a lot of trouble as a kid. I went to a great school, but got kicked out for getting into trouble.

I didn't box for many years. My dad didn't think I'd be tough enough. There's a moment in the documentary when

Lennox Lewis comes into his office and I'm saying, "I want to fight." Lennox said, "You not letting your son fight because you're worried about him getting hurt is like a parent not letting their child drive because they're worried about them getting in a crash. You can't live life like that." Soon after, I was put in the gym.

My first fight was watched by two million people. The commentators were comparing me to my legendary world champion father. But I was a one-fight novice. That pressure would make most people crumble, but I used it to fuel what I wanted to achieve. I didn't want to be Chris Eubank's son forever. I wanted to become my own man.

The mental side of boxing is as important as the physical. There are a lot of guys that are big, strong, tough, fast and can throw punches, but they

don't make it because they don't have the mental toughness, fortitude and discipline to apply themselves in the sport. It's the ones who have that mental solidarity and discipline that succeed.

You have to dedicate yourself to something completely. When I was younger, there were no rest days, no holidays, no partying. I was obsessed. Now I can be a little more lenient as I'm

Could I beat my dad in a boxing match? If we were in our prime, what a spicy fight that would have been

only fighting twice a year. When I started out, I had nine fights in one year.

I've cried once in the last 23 years, when my brother Sebastian died, three years ago. I'm not an emotional man. As you get older, you soften up. My brother had a son before he passed. His name is Raheem – I now consider him my son. Being around children makes you want to have your own kids. I think that's what's going to happen.

If you don't believe in a higher power, you're lost. We're here for a reason.

Could I beat my dad in a boxing match? He's an older man now. But if you mean in our primes, what a spicy fight that would be. ■

With thanks to Churchill's Boxing Gym (churchills-boxing-gym)



NEXT



Half the women in Britain aged over 50 will fracture a bone at some point. But in many cases it can be avoided. By dealing with falling levels of hormones at menopause, as well as encouraging weight-bearing exercise, the cost and health risks of broken bones can be reduced. Here, Kate Muir puts the spotlight on taking the pain out of osteoporosis

Illustration MATT CHASE

Give your bones a workout

Imagine a room full of women. Imagine half of them breaking a bone. What will it be? Hip? Spine? Wrist? Neck? Imagine the plaster casts, the metal screws, the pain, the immobility, the grief – a third of those who break a hip will die within a year, according to the NHS. The Royal Osteoporosis Society says one in two women over 50 in the UK will get a fracture due to osteoporosis. And that just doesn't need to happen.

Thanks to many factors, including neglect and gender bias in medicine, midlife women are not told about the simple preventive measures they can take to maintain healthy bones. "Your bones are silent until they break. And then they scream," says Dr Vonda Wright, a campaigning American orthopaedic surgeon and the author of *Fitness After 40: How to Stay Strong at Any Age*.

Two-thirds of osteoporosis sufferers are female for a reason: when hormones plummet around menopause, bone strength declines by 10 to 20%. Fragility fractures rocket up from the late 40s onwards. Low bone mineral density means brittle bones look like a Crunchie bar inside, honeycombed with big holes.

When Narelle Chidwick from Henley was 49, she was sent for a DEXA (dual energy x-ray absorptiometry bone scan) by the NHS after injuring her ribs during a family skiing holiday. "They told me I had osteoporosis, a high fracture risk and very low bone density. It was at the level of an 80 or 90-year-old woman. I was shocked. I didn't see it coming. I had early menopause at 46, but I'd been exercising, doing pilates, eating well." Now Chidwick and her 80-year-old father both have osteoporosis – but she is determined to try to rebuild her bones. >

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'Your bones are silent until they break. And then they scream': Dr Vonda Wright

► There are three very effective early ways to protect women (and some non-binary and trans people) from fractures: muscle-building, weight-bearing exercise, along with vitamin D, magnesium and calcium-rich foods, and using hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to slow bone loss and promote new growth.

"We need to identify high-risk women far earlier, long before they break a bone," says Dr Olivia Hum, a GP and menopause specialist on the British Menopause Society (BMS) advisory council. "Women with low body mass, a history of rheumatoid arthritis, osteoporosis in the family and those who smoke or drink heavily, or had an eating disorder. They need to know about strength training and exercise, discuss the benefits and risks of HRT and understand that it can significantly reduce fracture risk."

The BMS consensus statement says that HRT "remains an excellent option for prevention, particularly in younger women aged less than 60," helping women at low risk (with osteopenia, slightly lowered bone density) and even those with established osteoporosis.

While it has proved almost impossible for the NHS to get the sedentary midlife population skipping ropes or lifting weights, it is easy to offer HRT to those suitable. It is approved by the NHS and the US Food and Drug Administration for strengthening bones, as the oestrogen in HRT plays a role in maintaining bone density, balancing the constant removal and regrowth that occurs in menopause. It decreases menopause symptoms, too, which often encourages women to exercise and have a healthier lifestyle.

An *Endocrine Review* meta-analysis of 57 studies showed HRT can increase bone density by 7% on average over two years and reduce spinal fractures by a third. A decade-long trial in the journal *Bone* showed HRT increased spinal density by 13%, while the untreated comparison group had 5% bone loss. We also know now that headlines two decades ago suggesting HRT increased breast cancer in the Women's Health Initiative Study were exaggerated,

and have been debunked by menopause societies. Newer body-identical transdermal preparations, such as gels and patches are safer, too, with no increased risk of blood clots, according to the NHS.

Yet healthcare professionals dealing with early fractures rarely consider that option. With a research grant from *Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace*, I have worked on an investigation for months with Dr Bill Robertson-Smith, an NHS senior surgical care practitioner at Northampton General Hospital. She sent Freedom of Information requests asking for data from the NHS Fracture Liaison Services (FLS) which treats osteoporosis following fractures in people over 50.

Our data showed that in the past seven years, 356,229 women have been treated by FLS clinics. Out of those, only 169 were offered HRT afterwards. "I was astonished it was so low," said Dr Robertson-Smith. "Around three-quarters of those women would be over 65, but thousands of younger women in their 50s and early 60s who could benefit from HRT were never offered that option."

Although early menopausal, Chidwick was not offered HRT by her GP, but she was prescribed bisphosphonate drugs, as well as calcium carbonate and vitamin D. Bisphosphonates inhibit the removal of old bone, particularly when new bone is forming less in menopause – bones are a bit like tree branches, growing, shedding and renewing all the time. Bisphosphonates cost from £50 a year and are the first-line NHS treatment for men and women. But patients often complain of gastrointestinal, joint and flu-like symptoms. Due to that, and perceived lack of effect, around 40% of patients come off bisphosphonates

within a year, and 85% within three. Chidwick also looked into lifestyle changes, and was exasperated to receive a hospital letter suggesting she walked for 30 minutes three times a week. "I knew that wasn't anywhere near enough for bone density – I was already walking 10,000 steps a day and exercising when I got the diagnosis," she said. Chidwick did her own bone-building research online and found a trainer who was able to create a three-times-a-week strength and impact exercise programme.

Muscles are key to osteoporosis prevention, to holding up our skeletons, explains Dr Gabrielle Lyon, American author of the bestseller *Forever Strong*. "People think of bones as the end point of this silent disease, but low muscle mass is the first sign of low bone density. The best way to safeguard your independence is to protect your skeletal muscle mass. Muscle is the only organ system we can directly control."

Also in the States, Dr Wright is leading the charge on female osteoporosis, academically and with a million followers on her

Instagram. Wright, 57, explains: "I lift heavy! You need deadlifts, squats, bench-presses, chin-ups. Four reps, four sets. You can also stomp up and down the stairs and that helps, too." She adds: "Building muscle is the one thing you can do to save your metabolism, save your bones, prevent you from falling down and build brain resilience."

Dr Wright also authored a groundbreaking 2024 medical paper in the journal *Climacteric*, which named the problem for the first time in its title: The Musculoskeletal Syndrome of Menopause. "This means the collection of symptoms caused by oestrogen loss from perimenopause onwards, ►

'We need to identify high-risk women long before they break bones'

> including joint pain, muscle weakness, decreased bone density and increased risk of arthritis and fractures. Oestrogen doesn't just increase bone density, it reduces inflammation in our joints. So many women come into my clinic with frozen shoulder at this age, not due to injury, but because of inflammation."

In the paper, Dr Wright advocates holistically for exercise, vitamins and nutrition (one of her catchphrases is "Sugar bakes you from the inside," because it's inflammatory). She also calls for greater use of HRT. She says what's needed now is a study of the minimum effective doses of oestrogen for prevention. Studies show a small dose of 0.25mg/day works well, which would be good news for women who want to start HRT gently in later life, and Dr Wright said that's definitely an option. "It's crazy that women here usually only get Dexa scans once they are 65, when earlier screening would mean we could halt the damage."

Dr Hum agrees: "GPs can refer you for a Dexa if you fulfil the risk criteria, but sometimes we feel as if we're just firefighting in general practice and there's so little time to talk." She suggests that women can determine their own risk using the risk-checker on the Royal Osteoporosis Society website, and Dexa scans are available privately for upwards of £50. She also said that with more menopause awareness, some women come in asking for HRT to protect their bones, even if they don't have serious symptoms. "It's all about individual choice and the risk-benefit balance."

Exercise is essential as part of that balance. The science around high intensity impact training (Hiit) also interested Chidwick. Hiit is proven to improve bone density in



'Protect your skeletal muscle mass. Muscle is the only organ system we can directly control': Dr Gabrielle Lyon

postmenopausal women, and in the American LIFTMOR trial, 101 women over 58 with osteoporosis or osteopenia were assigned to two groups. Those in the conventional exercise group had a 1% loss of bone density, while those doing supervised high-intensity impact training – squats, deadlifts and jumping chin-ups twice a week – gained almost 3% density over eight months. It worked fast.

Why aren't we getting that message out to women? "Because we're the Special K generation," says Chidwick. Gen X grew up with messages favouring skinny over strong. Remember the Special K TV challenge from two decades ago, which told women they could "drop a jeans size in two weeks" by replacing two meals with bowls of sugary cereal? More than three decades after Madonna flexed her biceps on the Blond Ambition tour, there's still a sense for older generations that muscles are male.

Loss of muscle mass is called sarcopenia – and muscle mass can drop by 10% from early perimenopause to post-menopause. Dr Radhika Vohra, a GP and adviser to the Menopause Charity, agrees and wishes the NHS provided more specific information: "We'd be better doing more social prescribing, sending people on the NHS for six weeks' free training at a gym – but sadly that's a post-code lottery."

Strong muscles make a big difference to balance, too, important if osteoporosis has been diagnosed. Dr Wright talked about the tragedy of seeing frail women after falls, in hospital gowns undergoing massive operations, asking her, "what's happened to me? I'm not who I used to be." What actually happens in hospital? I spoke to Dr Robertson-Smith one day as she emerged after working



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alongside a senior surgeon on a peri-prosthetic fracture: "That's when they've had a metal hip replacement, for example, and have now fractured the bone around it, too. We've been operating for nearly three hours on a woman in her 80s, and I've just finished screwing a plate on to the length of the upper thigh and suturing the wound."

The operation takes its toll on an already frail patient and, including rehab afterwards, costs the NHS about £30,000, according to Dr Robertson-Smith. On the front line for the past 11 years, she has grown increasingly frustrated by the lack of preventive care. "The use of HRT wasn't part of my education in orthopaedics," she says, "and medical colleagues have said the same." But medicine works in silos and menopause experts, surgeons, endocrinologists and rheumatologists rarely confer. So the more complex picture is often overlooked. It's the orchestra of hormones that makes bones work.

Dr Robertson-Smith explains: "The main role of oestrogen in bone health is to prevent bone loss, but we also know that progesterone has an important part to play in stimulating bone growth. There is also a positive association between testosterone and bone mineral density, so all of these hormones matter." Men with early low testosterone levels are more likely to get osteoporosis, too.

'The NHS should send people for six weeks free training at a gym'

NHS data shows 19% of women are on HRT, a massive increase over the past three years as public menopause knowledge has grown, so that may mean a generational improvement in osteoporosis rates. But increasing prevention would be bad news for the pharmaceutical industry, which makes \$16bn worldwide annually from osteoporosis drugs. Pharmaceutical capitalism thrives on sickness care, rather than preventive care.

What really needs to change is that preventive care should be offered to women at a much younger age, ideally in their 40s. Dr Vohra explains that the 40-plus health-check list for all women doesn't mention osteoporosis or menopause, instead concentrating on high blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, body mass index, exercise and alcohol. "General practice gets paid to keep a register of patients already diagnosed

with osteoporosis, but they don't get paid for preventing it. Yet osteopenia is that lovely window when you can change things for women, and we miss it."

Dr Hum agrees: "This needs to be done at a national level. GPs need to have the time and resources so they can be involved with prevention."

Dr Vohra has done groundbreaking research

on menopause and ethnicity in the UK. A report in the journal *Bone* showed Asian women are at a similar risk of osteoporosis as white women, yet only 6% use HRT. Risk for Black women is slightly lower, but only 5% use HRT. "Menopause care is lacking for people from economically deprived and ethnic backgrounds. There's more early menopause, too. Disparities in nutrition, education and poverty mean women are losing bone mineral density earlier and are less likely to get help. We need to be proactive."

This is a significant public health issue costing the NHS £4.6bn a year for women and men. The Royal Osteoporosis Society says a quarter of people don't even know what "osteoporosis" means, so we need a public and social media conversation, as there has been for menopause.

The lack of education remains incredibly frustrating, says Chidwick. "What if I'd been given a DEXA scan when I went into early menopause? This is all about mortality and it's not OK. I want to have a life, so what do I do? I've gone out and asked questions, but what about the people who don't? Putting a Band-Aid on afterwards isn't working." ■

Kate Muir (@menoscandal) is the author of *Everything You Need to Know About the Menopause*, published by Simon & Schuster at £9.99. Buy it for £8.99 at guardianbookshop.com.

The Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace "Give Your Bones a Break" campaign launches on 7 November. For information, go to menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk



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A photograph of a purple armchair in a room with dark blue vertical blinds. The chair is in the foreground, and the blinds are in the background, creating a strong vertical pattern.

Is this the most hated woman on TV?

The BBC receives more abusive messages about Marianna Spring than anyone else. But the disinformation correspondent is still hopeful about people – and the world we live in

Interview EVA WISEMAN
Photographs MANUEL VÁZQUEZ



While organising an interview with Marianna Spring, the BBC's first Social Media Investigations correspondent, I asked if I could meet her at home. It would be more intimate than meeting at the BBC's offices,

I said, more relaxed. But a communications manager called me on the phone. It's a bit sensitive, she said. It's not that Marianna doesn't want me to go to her house, she explained, it's just... the trolls.

In the first five months of 2023, the BBC received 14,488 messages abusive enough to be escalated by their system designed to detect hate; 11,771 of those, around 80%, were about Spring. Due to her reporting on conspiracy theories she's regularly targeted with death threats and harassment, both on and offline. For a while, a man camped in a tent outside the BBC's New Broadcasting House shouting "disinformation agent" in her face as she left work. Which means, while I can say Spring welcomes me with a hug and invites me into her front room for a conversation that will span murder and Kate Middleton and teenage boys, I can't describe the city she lives in, or who she lives with, or if she lives with anybody else at all, or give any personal details that might put her in danger.

"It's quite a big deal for me this," she says nervously, as we settle on her sofa. "I keep so private, because I know that the world I investigate has attracted this group of trolls who will stop at nothing to figure out literally everything about me and then use it in some way." She once mentioned that her dad was a doctor, which led to strangers suggesting this connection is why she is invested in killing people with the Covid vaccine. Once she shared a picture online of her family's 19-year-old cat and she was accused noisily of animal cruelty. "They also called her Chairman Miaow," Spring adds, "which was actually quite funny."

Spring grew up in south London. At eight years old she'd "make my poor little sister sit and watch BBC world news when we were on holiday. I remember my mum coming in and saying, 'Why are you watching this, get outside!'" After graduating from Oxford, she sent Emily Maitlis some examples of her journalism and got a job on *Newsnight*. Later, as the 2020 American election approached, the BBC asked her to report on the sociological aspects of social media and its impact on democracy. Spring was 23. She'd been obsessed with news since 9/11 and, as she got older, became obsessed further with the conspiracy theories that surrounded it. When the pandemic began, reporting the real-world consequences of disinformation became even more necessary. A 2023 survey found that around a third of the public believe various conspiracy theories, such as "Covid-19 was a hoax" and "15-minute cities are an attempt by governments to restrict people's personal freedom and keep them under surveillance." What used to be seen as paranoia, now blurs into beliefs held by many millions.

For a typical investigation, Spring will create a series of fake online profiles to see what the algorithms deliver. "I think I currently have 24 phones. Every time I swing by the desk of the poor bloke who looks after the retired iPhones at the BBC he's wary because he thinks I must be selling them on."

Today her work, which includes *Panorama* investigations and a BBC podcast *Why Do You Hate Me?*, sees her dig into the darkest corners of the internet, a place she calls "Conspiracyland". Here she meets the people who live there, like those who claim terrorist attacks have been staged. Sometimes she meets her own trolls, too. The harassment she receives "is almost always about me being a young woman, attempting to undermine my credibility, using gendered slurs. You know, I'm everything from a silly little girl who couldn't possibly know what's going on to an evil whore who's eating babies." She never would have guessed her own harassment would be such a large part of the story, "but I think it's important to talk about it. I think a huge number of women in public life are subject to this and obviously it's way worse if you also get racist abuse and other forms of hate. And it normalises it if we don't talk about it."

As well as using her own experiences as an example of how online hate metastasises, her work has become a vital tool for those seeking to understand the conspiracy theories that continue to shape our world and how, when the people in power abuse that power, they fuel anxieties that prompt these theories. Democracy relies on a shared >



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'I am a very positive person, but everything I investigate is very dark'

› reality, Spring says. "So, we're sitting on the sofa, right? And I might love this sofa and you might hate this sofa, but if we don't agree the sofa is here, we can't have a conversation. That's the thing we should be worried about – the conversation is not about the sofa, the conversation has to begin with, "Why don't you think the sofa is here?"

She's had many such conversations with theoretical sofa deniers, like those she calls the "true believers". Last year, she met a woman called Natalie in Totnes who believes that governments are trying to control us through things like attempts to limit pollution. While telling her this, Spring says, Natalie suddenly started crying. "She said she felt so isolated from people in her life. It was the same in America, talking to a woman who believed Trump's assassination was staged. She started crying, too. It's stressful not being able to trust anything any more, to truly believe these plots are happening, that everyone is out to murder and kill people in your life. You can understand why that would make you feel untethered from the world around you."

What might surprise readers, she says, is that most of the conspiracy theorists she's met aren't bad people. She sits with them at home, like we're doing now. They have tea together. Biscuits. "Often they arrive at these places from really legitimate points. They really care, they're very worried about other human beings who are being hurt, or powerful people doing bad stuff. But they are themselves being exploited by other people on social media."

Other memorable interviewees include people whose lives have been overturned by these conspiracy theorists. In February, Martin Hibbert, a survivor of the 2017 Manchester Arena attack, won his bid to sue Richard D Hall, who claimed nobody died in the attack, and that Hibbert and his daughter (both of whom were left with severe disabilities) were not there. "People like Martin are so brave. He's willing to stand up against the conspiracy theories and abuse that he and his daughter have been subject to after living through something most people can't even imagine. But also what he's doing could set a really important precedent for how this stuff is dealt with."

This is the most important part of Spring's job, she thinks: giving a voice to people, like the family of 13-year-old Olly Stephens. In 2021, two schoolboys who ambushed him after a dispute online were convicted of his murder. Spring investigated the role social media played and exposed how teenagers' Instagram, YouTube and Facebook accounts routinely recommend violent videos and knives for sale. People like Stephens's parents "often feel as though the social media companies are not listening to what they have to say and the politicians don't get it, and so if I can be the person that investigates it, that is the greatest privilege."

Spring, 28 now, takes barely a breath in our two-hour conversation. She has the charisma and energy of a kids' TV presenter, delivering complex ideas in digestible explanations with empathy and wit. "I am a very positive person, which is important because everything I investigate is largely very dark. That positivity is a really valuable thing, because it keeps you going – I'm someone who is fundamentally hopeful about people."

I wonder where she sees her career going. Does she have ambitions to become the next Emily Maitlis? "Oh!" she says. Well, she loves the investigative work and the presenting, but it's the public service element of her job that excites her. "The landscape is changing so much it's quite hard to know what work is going to look like in 10 years." And by then, she predicts, "everything will be a social media investigation – you can't untangle the two things."

Has she ever been taken in by disinformation herself? "Hmm!" She thinks, theatrically. Around the time she started doing this job, there were wildfires spreading across Australia and on her Instagram she started to see memes of, "I want to say... wombats? They were very cute and very big, and they were hiding other baby animals from the flames. I sent them to my friends, these wombats, but it later transpired the story was just complete rubbish." It's easy to be tricked, she says – that's what disinformation is designed to do, to exploit our emotions, our legitimate concerns, our real anxieties, often for profit. That's why

we need to remove the stigma attached to people who get drawn in, she stresses. "There's this idea that they're stupid or crazy, but it's just not the case – they're often really cynical and clever and engaged. They probably spend a bit too much time on social media, which they readily admit to me, but honestly, they could be any of us."

Earlier this year, in fact, it was. After the Princess of Wales's absence from the public eye became a talking point, the palace published a family portrait to quash gossip, but the image only increased speculation, leading to "Kategate" with thousands of people scrutinising photos and sharing theories to fill a vacuum of information. Yet "I've investigated quite a lot of online sleuthing where people come up with things that are true," says Spring. "Like they'd sussed out Molly-Mae's new brand before she'd even announced it. But then there are other examples, everything from when Nicola Bulley disappeared to Kate Middleton, to Jay Slater who also disappeared this year." Spring saw patterns appearing. "People often come from a point of caring, and wanting to understand what's going on, but then we all get a bit sucked in. And the theories are more exciting and interesting often than the truth, which can be quite complicated and quite boring and quite sad."

This year, after the stabbing attacks in Sydney, falsely blamed on a Jewish student, then, when riots spread after a false name was attributed on X to the man who killed three children in Southport, Spring became increasingly desperate to interview Elon Musk about the part social media played. She's tried many times – for a while, X's comms department replied to all journalists' emails with a poop emoji. Spring found herself lying in bed at night thinking about what she'd ask him. "Questions around decisions he's made that appear to have had a real-world impact – decisions about blue ticks, decisions about the algorithm, decisions about what's allowed and what isn't. I was thinking, maybe I should just go to San Francisco, maybe he'd talk to me then. It's worrying that he won't, when you're trying to hold these kinds of powerful institutions to account – these companies are as powerful as lots of governments in many cases." She wants to ask him specific questions about people

who have experienced serious harm as a result of disinformation and what's being recommended on their feeds. "A lot of what I imagine Elon Musk would say is about how the UK want to clamp down on freedom of expression, and my challenge to that would be, well what about the freedom of expression of these people who've been harmed? When does it stop, how does it stop, and how do you how do you deal with that? This is the question at the crux of all of this."

She's thinking about the people she's met in Conspiracyland, who see people they trust sharing disinformation at the top of their feeds, posts that are getting hundreds of likes, "and that not only affects their perception of reality, but more broadly this shared concept of reality that we all rely on." Instead of answering her interview requests, "He'll probably just share this interview. In the past he's tweeted a picture of me which resulted in an absolute wave of online abuse and hate and threats." But she'll keep on asking. "I'm the BBC's Social Media Investigations Correspondent, but have not interviewed anyone senior at his company for more than two years – that shows us that there's a problem with accountability. If cabinet ministers just stopped doing interviews, everyone would be really outraged."

One side effect of her work is that Spring has become a sort of social media agony aunt, with people messaging her regular questions, often about their experiences of trolling, or asking whether a story they've seen is real, or for advice on kids and phones. She always responds, but, she says, it's not simply a case of telling them to go offline: "We've reached a point where it would be very difficult to live without our phones and there are positives that come out of using social media, it doesn't feel like it should be on all of us to change how we live in order to keep ourselves safe – that is ultimately a responsibility that the majority of the social media companies have signed up to."

What does she think about the move to ban phones for kids? "Again, it shifts the accountability away from the companies and I don't think we should be letting them off the hook that lightly!" It reminds her of people who, having heard about her experiences

of trolling, ask why she doesn't simply quit social media. "First, it's what I investigate so it'd be a bit like asking a political journalist not to be in the House of Commons, but also, why should people have to leave a particular social media platform, when they're entitled to be there, too?"

As the pandemic subsided she thought the conspiracy movement might calm down a little. "I thought people might go, 'Oh, you've had a bit of a funny half hour there,' but I don't think that has been the case and I think it will continue to not be the case." There are people, she says, who truly have shifted in how they view reality. "I don't know how many more times I have to investigate almost the same thing, which is," she lifts her head, vaguely maddened, "a situation in which something hateful or false spreads on social media, is actively pushed by the algorithms, that causes harm or has a serious consequence for people. Then I track all those people down, email the social media companies saying this has happened, and then..."

And then? "We go again! I don't know how many times that has to happen before someone says, 'OK, how are we dealing with this?'" What needs to change? "Well, when you start thinking of the companies more like governments, even though they're not elected, that maybe helps? A lot of this is about fundamentally how the companies' sites operate and it does frequently come back to algorithms. Until we reach a place where safety is more important than engagement, these kinds of things will keep happening." She pauses and leans back on the sofa, which exists, and seats two, and is blue. "My job is to expose the problems. I guess, I hope people reading will come up with solutions." ■

Marianna Spring's podcast, *Why Do You Hate Me*, is now available on BBC Sounds ([bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk))



Rob Beckett's easy charm and eye for a cracking joke have made him one of Britain's most popular standups. But behind his infectious humour, he's had to deal with dark thoughts and confront his own anxieties. Ahead of his latest tour, he talks about staying happy, the perfect gig – and what he owes his family

'All comedians are broken'



Towards the end of 2019, the comedian Rob Beckett called his wife, and then his agent, to tell them he was struggling to cope. He had travelled to South Africa to film the second series of the Bafta award-winning show *Rob & Romesh Vs*, which follows attempts by him and fellow funnyman Romesh Ranganathan to learn new skills. (Previous episodes include: modelling with David Gandy, country music with Shania Twain.) This time they were playing cricket with Kevin Pietersen and going on safari. The trip should have been a breeze. But, as he tells me over lunch in a bustling, high-end London restaurant, he was heading towards burnout. "The job was basically a lads' trip, getting pissed with one of my best mates," he says. "And I was like, 'Well, if *this* doesn't make me happy...'"

Beckett, who is 38, had a happy, lively childhood in working-class southeast London. He lived with his parents and two of his four brothers, who mocked and teased each other relentlessly. (His mum, known as "Big Suze", has jokingly described the family home as the House of No Compassion. "I was called Jaffa Cake Nips because I had

fat nipples through puberty," Beckett has said.) Money was tight and he found school extremely difficult, leaving education with a chronic lack of self-worth and little idea of what to do next. When comedy called, he launched himself into it, saying yes to every opportunity in case it was his last, repurposing his insecurity into ammunition. "It was a toxic fuel," he says. "Effective, like chucking petrol on a bonfire, but unsustainable." He soon became a fixture on our screens: as presenter on the ITV2 spin-off show *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here! Now!*, as a team captain on *8 Out of 10 Cats*, a contestant on *Taskmaster*, the narrator on *Celebs Go Dating*. By 2019, he had become a well-known personality who was happily married with two young daughters. Yet fear and panic possessed him. "I had all the markers of a successful person," he says, "but I was having suicidal thoughts." He adds quickly that he didn't attempt to act on them. Instead, on his agent's recommendation, he underwent six months of intense sessions with a therapist. Then Covid hit, forcing him to stop and reflect on "what was basically a low-level anxiety disorder, poverty mindset and impostor syndrome". >

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Funny man: (from left) with Romesh Ranganathan; dressed as a giraffe at the 2024 Brits; in *A Night of Comedy* for the Teenage Cancer Trust; with his wife Louise; and fronting *Smart TV*

Despite our grand surroundings today – art-deco features, plush seating – Beckett is warm and unpretentious. He speaks openly in chipper estuary English about this challenging period, delivering his theory that “all comedians are broken... there’s got to be something wrong that drives us to achieve” with the same dynamism as the story – or lack of – behind the title of his forthcoming tour, *Giraffe*. (The tour’s artwork features Beckett’s head attached to an artificially elongated mammalian neck against a yellow background.) “I thought it’d be funny,” he says of him as a giraffe. Of the tour, he continues: “You’ll come to the show, laugh, then leave. There’s no big message.”

Beckett’s standup routine is packed with jokes drawn from everyday minutiae: driving, ageing parents, puberty. “I write whatever makes me laugh, basically.” It’s clear he’s grappled with the heady mix of heightened ego and low self-esteem that often befalls his peers. “Comedians aren’t as important or influential as we like to think. We’re a Chinese takeaway, a pint at the pub, a distraction.”

For Beckett, the stakes for this tour feel lower than his last, in 2021. Back then he “worried about it going wrong, because of catastrophic thinking”. His entire wellbeing was dependent on whether he felt funny enough – he constantly compared his act to others. “I’d either be king of the world or a piece of shit. My head would go: ‘Kevin Bridges is better than that.’” With his therapist, he developed coping strategies inspired by Eckhart Tolle, Alan Watts and the teachings of stoicism. Now, he has a calm, unencumbered approach to work. “I’m a funny person with funny jokes. I’ll go out there, tell them and not try to control the outcome.” His priority lies in arriving at each show “happy and healthy, just trying my best” and separating himself from the audience’s reaction. “If it goes brilliantly, it’s not because I’m amazing, it’s just that particular gig went well.”

When we speak, he’s in the middle of a string of modest “work-in-progress” shows to practise new material. The previous night he performed in a small coastal town to a crowd that was older than he’s used to. He takes out his phone and, chuckling, shows me a short clip of the front row, which is mainly pensioners. “They were lovely, but I’ve got a routine about getting pubes late and a lady said ‘DisGUSTing’ out loud, which really made me laugh.” A comment like that might previously have ruined his evening, but now he’s determined to embrace each and every moment: “If it’s awkward, enjoy the awkwardness!” Working towards letting go, he reckons, has improved the show, “because there’s this relaxed person that’s enjoying themselves, rather than someone thinking, ‘If I’m not funny I’m going to lose everything.’”

For most comedians, rehearsal involves meticulous memorising, but Beckett’s method is intentionally *laissez-faire*. “I’ve never been one for a big story-arc. My idea of the perfect gig is that I’ve prepared my jokes, but I go on and don’t need any of it. It’s almost impossible to do that for 90 minutes, but the ultimate dream is going on with something entirely new.” Connection with his audience is more important than a pitch-perfect monologue. “I like the freedom of it feeling like a laugh with your friends.”

From his backpack he pulls out a plastic folder containing a notepad page covered in short bullet points of indecipherable writing. It looks like someone’s shopping list, or a doctor’s prescription pad. I’m unnerved to learn that this is the sum total of his tour notes. Noticing my alarm, he explains that, for him, writing it all down is pointless.

On a recent episode of *Parenting Hell*, the hit podcast he presents with Josh Widdicombe that explores “the trials and tribulations of modern-day parenting”, Beckett spoke about his late diagnosis of dyslexia. The signs were always there, he says, but he was compelled to see a private consultant after realising he was hindering, not helping, his daughter with her homework. In his retelling, the three-hour assessment over video call, with a woman who reminded him of a teacher, was mentally and emotionally taxing. Memories of his school-years flooded back: he became sweaty, agitated – then burst into tears. His reasoning for this refers back to an Eckhart Tolle concept that we carry emotional pain in our physical body. On the podcast episode, he explained to Widdicombe that being asked questions about his past opened a “pain-body memory I hadn’t accessed, that I had chosen to stay away from”. During the conversation he disclosed an almost total absence of short-term memory when writing down sequences of numbers and letters and that he has to visualise where he’s last seen a word to know how it’s spelled. The assessor confirmed the diagnosis – and he broke down once more.

Beckett’s recounting to Widdicombe is up-tempo and without self-pity. Still, listening to his revelation that the education system isn’t designed for children like him is incredibly touching. “I was told I was thick and that I wasn’t trying, but I was trying 10 times harder than the others in the class,” he says now. The whole exchange typifies the podcast, which consistently rides high in the listening charts and has spawned a *Sunday Times* bestseller book and a nationwide arena tour. The pair excel at exploring the sublime to the ridiculous: the school run, eating habits, existential despair when the car keys are accidentally microwaved (Beckett); your two small children insist on sleeping in your bedroom (Widdicombe).

In Beckett’s memoir, *A Class Act*, he recalls his mum and dad being told by his teacher that he would never be a high achiever. Beckett was four at the time. Why wasn’t his dyslexia picked up sooner? “My brother got diagnosed when he was young, because of more obvious problems with his spelling and reading,” he says, “but because my main issue is retaining information it was harder to spot.” Like other members of his family, his dad, “Super Dave”, who “left school at 13 with cane marks on his arse to drive a van”, is undiagnosed but almost definitely has dyslexia, too.

A story in Beckett’s memoir describes his mum buying Dave (who worked as a cabbie at the time) his first book – *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾* – at the age of 43. Because the chapters were short, he was able to read them in the taxi rank between fares; now, he reads all the time. Did being working class contribute to them not being diagnosed? “Class always boils down to money,” Beckett says. “School didn’t pick it up and there just wasn’t the opportunity, or the time, to go private.”

In the years leading to his diagnosis, Beckett relied on his caniness and natural charisma. “When I worked in an office, I couldn’t really do the admin, but I was good with people, so I’d focus on that. I created an entire life for

myself where I didn’t need the things that dyslexia makes harder for you.” Since his diagnosis, he has a deeper understanding of himself. “It’s the equivalent of having Ikea furniture and someone giving you an allen key and instructions. Knowledge is power, essentially.”

He knows his needs at work (script meetings are necessary, but he finds reading through them in a group mentally draining) and that his strength lies in getting on with it on the studio floor. “If you said, ‘Go and host a TV show’ I’d rather do it straight away, and I’d probably be better for it. It’s like being asked to do a handstand for half an hour then lift weights and you’re like, ‘My arms are gone!’” His scrappy tour notes, in this context, make perfect sense. “My ideas are in here,” he says, pointing to his head, “but by the time I work out how to get my ideas down there...” he points to the page. “It’s all gone.”

Beckett’s latest tour is a mammoth one. Due to high demand, there are multiple consecutive dates in most of the theatres he’s playing in. He could have opted for fewer shows in larger venues, but he wanted to give people a proper night out in a beautiful room. Affinity with his audience is a key factor. “I can be there for two or three

nights, really enjoy it, as opposed to ‘Right that’s done, next one.’”

The shows wrap up in 2026, then “I’d like to have a break and do a lot less. I’m already tapering down, so Lou can do more.” Lou is Beckett’s wife, Louise Watts, a history teacher who stepped back from her career to raise their daughters. She’s known to the loyal listenership of *Parenting Hell* through Beckett’s lighthearted yarns from their family life, as a popular guest on the podcast itself, and for contributing a chapter to their book (she also has a blog about motherhood). Now the children are eight and six, she’s gearing up for

a return to the workforce. Could they be the next TV power-couple? “We’ve had offers. I’m not ruling it out, but at the moment it’s hard.” He grins. “Anyway, we’d have to get a babysitter then! Also, I’d quite like her to crack on so I can retire. I’d be happy to do nothing except play video games.”

It’s difficult to imagine Beckett doing less. “I’ve got 100 ideas at once. I got made redundant from office jobs so many times I always make sure I’ve got other things on the go.” He plans to stream himself playing a new gaming PC, and he’d like to continue the podcast until Widdicombe’s youngest child – who is now three – goes to university. “Then we’ll start it again when we’ve got grandkids.” Mainly, he wants to be present for himself and his family. “It sounds wanky, but I go to bed every night and ask myself, ‘Did I enjoy today, yes or no?’ If I didn’t, I’ll try to change the things I don’t like. I don’t look beyond that. If you have too much of an idea of who you are and where you want to go, it limits you. At the moment, I’m sort of floating along.” ■

Rob Beckett’s tour, *Giraffe*, resumes next month, for tickets and dates, see [ticketmaster.co.uk](https://www.ticketmaster.co.uk); his podcast, *Parenting Hell*, is available wherever you get your podcasts. If you have been affected by any of the issues in this interview, please contact mind.org.uk

At one gig a lady said ‘DisGUSTing’ out loud. It really made me laugh

Food & drink

Nigel Slater



@NigelSlater



Golden fruit to add flavour while autumn leaves fall

I have been buying assortments of apples, dipping into the paper bag without looking, crunching skin, flesh and core as I walk back from the shops. As sure as the leaves fall each autumn, the desire to bite into as many different apples as I can, while the season for local varieties is upon us, never lessens. Good russets, hard as Blackpool rock, are around for just a few weeks, as are those varieties you can pick up briefly from farm shops and markets, such as Ashmead's Kernel, Worcester Pearmain and, if you are lucky, the crisp, ruby-fleshed Red Devil.

I added apples to two salads this week, the first a couple of Cox's with their signature flash of orange and russet, a sharp crunch to a salad of young kale

leaves with a roasted peanut dressing. Later in the week, a couple of ice-cold Worcesters, refreshing and slightly tart, went into a salad with walnuts, chicory, Lancashire cheese and walnut oil. I kept the skins intact and dressed the fruit quickly, so the flesh kept its bright colour.

The first of the new season's pears appeared a couple of weeks ago. The first, a rough-skinned conference, crisp as ice, was enjoyed with chunks of Irish Coolea, sweet and with a texture similar to that of a well-matured Gouda. After that, the simplest of pear tarts, made with shortcake-like pastry and poached pears. A cheat really, but none the worse for that.

The late, wet spring has led to just one, admittedly rather beautiful, Doyenne

du Comice on my espalier outside the kitchen. I barely saw a bee, butterfly or wasp till the blossom was over, so I was waiting for a smaller harvest than usual, and that is what I got. This pear will be eaten with much quiet ceremony, its juicy flesh gorged on like the feast it is. My lone, golden pear feels so precious it may even get its own knife and linen napkin.

Kale, apple and peanuts

Young, curly kale leaves are sweet and nutty, without the pungent brassica notes of the larger leaves. Serves 3. Ready in 30 minutes

For the dressing:

crunchy peanut butter 2 tbsp
honey 2 tbsp
roasted sesame oil 1 tsp
tamari soy sauce 1 tbsp
lemon juice 2 tbsp

kale leaves 2 large handfuls
dessert apples 2-3
gammon 250g (optional), a thick slice
peanuts 50g, salted and roasted

Put the peanut butter, honey and sesame oil in a small mixing bowl, add the soy sauce, then mix thoroughly. Introduce the lemon juice a little at a time, tasting as you go. I found that about 2 tbsp gives the right balance of nutty, sweet and sour.

Wash the kale leaves and tear them into small pieces, then put them in a large bowl. Cut the apples in half and remove their cores, then slice thinly. Add them to the kale leaves, then pour in the dressing and toss together gently.

Heat an overhead grill or griddle pan. Lightly season the gammon with black pepper, then cook on or under the heat until the fat is golden and translucent. Remove from the heat and slice into thick strips. Toss with the kale, its dressing and the roasted peanuts.

Pear shortcake tart

The simplest of tarts that involves no lining of tart cases or making pastry cream, just pears, sweet pastry and tart jam. I poached the pears from scratch, which took about 30 minutes, including peeling them. The poaching syrup can be refrigerated and sealed for a few days and used again. If you are really pushed for time and fancied a taste of nostalgia, you could use bottled or tinned pears.

Serves 6. Ready in 2 hours

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN



Crunch time:
kale, apple and
peanuts. Facing
page: pear
shortcake tart



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Food & drink

Nigel Slater

My lone Doyenne du Comice pear will be eaten with ceremony – it may even get its own knife and fork

granulated or caster sugar 100g
cloves 4
cinnamon stick 1
pears 4, each weighing about 200g

For the pastry:
plain flour 160g
butter 100g
caster sugar 60g
ground almonds 60g
egg yolk 1
water 2–3 tbsp
apricot jam 4 tbsp
ice-cream or cream to serve

Put 1 litre of water in a large saucepan, add the sugar, cloves and the cinnamon stick and bring to the boil. Peel the pears. Halve them, then remove their cores with a teaspoon and lower them into the syrup and turn the heat down. Leave to simmer, gently, for about 20 minutes or until they are translucent. Remove the pears from their syrup and set aside to drain.

To make the pastry by hand, put the flour into a large mixing bowl, cut the butter into small pieces and rub into the flour. Stir in the sugar and ground almonds. Lightly beat the egg yolk and mix into the crumbs with enough water (about 2–3 tbsp) to form a firm, rollable dough. Bring together into a ball, then refrigerate for 30 minutes while you prepare the pears. If you prefer, reduce the flour and butter to crumbs in a food processor, introduce the almonds, sugar, beaten yolk and a little water, then transfer to a lightly floured board and shape into a ball with your hands. Wrap the dough in greaseproof paper and rest in the fridge for 30 minutes.

Set the oven to 200C/gas mark 6 and place a baking sheet in the oven to heat. Roll the pastry out into a rectangle measuring 20 x 30cm and transfer to a second baking sheet. Crimp the edges or leave them plain. Chill for 15 minutes, then bake for 25–30 minutes until the pastry is golden and dry to the touch.

Slice the pears thinly, then arrange them, each one slightly overlapping, on the cooked pastry. Warm the apricot jam, then brush generously on to the pears. Heat an overhead (oven) grill. Place the tart under the grill until the jam bubbles. Remove from the oven, rest for 15 minutes, then eat warm with ice-cream or cream. ■



Nigel's midweek supper Tomato, ricotta and basil toasts

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

Make the basil oil: pour 6 tbsp of olive oil into a blender jug and add 2 tbsp of warm water. Pull 15 medium-sized basil leaves (about 5g) from their stalks and add them to the oil with a good pinch of sea salt and a grinding or two of black pepper. Process all the ingredients to a deep green dressing.

Get an overhead grill hot. Remove the stalks from 3 or 4 large tomatoes and a handful of smaller ones. Cut the larger ones in half. Leave the small tomatoes whole. Put them all on a grill pan or baking sheet, trickle lightly with some more olive oil, and place them under the grill. Leave until their skins have started to brown here and there and the tomatoes are soft and juicy.

Remove from the heat and set aside. Toast 4 thick slices of open-textured

bread until golden, then trickle with a little more olive oil. Divide 100g of soft ricotta between the toasts, either spreading in a thick wave on each or in small spoonfuls over the surface. Place the tomatoes on top of the ricotta and trickle with the juices from the grill pan. Finish with a few spoonfuls of basil oil over each. Serves 2. Ready in 15 minutes

● If you are a coriander fan, then add some to the dressing with a small pinch of sugar.

● A dab of garlic paste is pleasing in the dressing, introduced with the basil leaves.

● A couple of anchovy fillets laid over the surface of each toast is my first choice should I feel the need to embellish my toast further. ■

Food & drink

Jay Rayner



@jayrayner1

The menu at Bristol's 1 York Place wanders across Europe – but you'll end up wanting to stay put

1 York Place

Clifton, Bristol BS8 1AH (1yorkplace.co.uk). Snacks and starters **£5–£14.50**. Mains **£26.50–£30.50**. Desserts **£5.50–£10.50**. Set-price three-course menu **£29.50**. Wines from **£30**

There's a cold television-drama rain in Bristol today: the kind of aggressive downpour that special effects teams use for gloomy crime-show night shoots so that it reads on camera, but that never happens in real life. Except it's happening today, up here in these cream and stucco streets on the edge of Clifton. The sky is the colour

of a battleship, the gutters are overflowing and nobody is walking. They are running. Now I am running, too, from a cab to the refuge that is 1 York Place. The picture windows are illuminated by warm orange lamps that act as a beacon against this lunchtime's early evening light and the dining room is dressed in gentle Scandi shades of oatmeal. There are dried wild grasses attached to the walls, which serve to emphasise just what an escape from the storm this space will be.

All good restaurants serve as a refuge; as a redoubt against the tiresome demands of life, work or, as today, the weather. 1 York Place, the latest Bristol restaurant from chef Freddy Bird, does the job beautifully. I first tried his cooking in 2010 at the Bristol Lido, the best-catered swimming pool in Britain. His food there was what you'd treat yourself to after a brisk 50 lengths, or perhaps after watching someone else complete them: wood-roasted fish or lamb, fat ravioli filled with long-braised venison, a fennel and blood orange salad that referenced his years cooking at the Iberian-influenced Moro. A few years ago he opened the Little French in Bristol's Westbury Park, which delivered on the name's promise: fish soup, beef fillet with a peppercorn sauce, plus a side of the cheese and potato wonder that is aligot.

Now there is this second restaurant, which opened last year, and wanders Europe a little more widely. What unites them is a determination to fill the plate to the very edge without recourse to daintiness or understatement. Come hungry. The snacks include potato beignet, served hot. It is a mashed potato and flour batter that has been dropped into the deep-fat fryer until puffed up to a deep golden, leaving a soft, gooey centre. Excavate the avalanche of freshly grated parmesan, flecked with smoked paprika, to find these knobbly doughnuts. Underneath, to reinforce the umami, is a cream flavoured with salted anchovy. Or have their whipped cod's roe, the central well of which is generously filled with amber jewels of trout roe. Alongside are chopped up radishes for crunch and fire. When they run out, move on to the nutty crust of the sourdough.

Those two dishes, costing £14.50, would serve as a classy, brilliantly unbalanced weekday lunch; an



A rustling heap of moon-shaped squash fritters in a shattering batter is dribbled with molasses and dusted with dried oregano

Take refuge: (clockwise from left) squash fritters; the dining room; potato beignet; whipped cod's roe with radish; chicken pastilla; John Dory with shrimp; and frangipane tart

indulgence that you might not admit to anyone else. But there are other things demanding our attention. Prime among them is the lunch time and early evening set-price menu, which is £29.50, including a glass of wine, a Bulgarian Merlot perhaps, or a crisp Spanish white. The successful writing of a set-price menu is a serious skill. It needs to work the margins while not looking as if it's offering second best. It needs to be tightly written, but still cover most dietaries. There needs to be the whiff of bargain luxury. This one, which costs less than the most expensive main course, does it all brilliantly.

From that menu I start with a rustling heap of moon-shaped squash fritters, in a shattering batter dribbled with miel de cana or sugarcane molasses, and dusted with dried oregano. Underneath are soft nuggets of ricotta as a foil to the sweetness. After my lunch I looked back at what I started with at the Bristol Lido all those years ago: discs of battered and deep-fried pumpkin, with honey and oregano and goat's cheese. I like a cook who cleaves to his own good ideas. The other starter on



the set price menu was buttermilk-fried squid with aioli.

For my main I chose pieces of pork belly, over the tagliatelle in a lobster sauce, because these are the complicated, troubling choices my life demands now. Pray for me. The crackling crunched. The meat was soft. Underneath was a heap of nutty lentils. Slumped across the side was a sweet-sour quince jelly that would have bellowed autumn if the rain slapping the windows didn't already have that covered. For colour there were some vividly purple leaves of what we were told was "heritage" kale, its heritage possibly having something to do with a filthy hook-up with Barney the Dinosaur. It was that purple. This was meat and two veg, after it had learned how to polish its shoes at Swiss finishing school.

It is no criticism of the main menu to say that I really didn't feel I was getting second best. I just had a smaller choice. The à la carte starters included a thick plank of crunchy-shelled pastilla, made with shredded chicken leg, with a whack of cinnamon, but a light touch on the sweetness. It came with a banging harissa relish to remind you this was a savoury dish. That was followed by two slabs of John Dory, skin crisped and salty, flesh white and lightly bronzed, on a buttery mess of leeks and brown shrimps. If there's a criticism, it's that the portion was huge. Less on the plate could have brought down the £30.50 price tag and it might have proved finishable. Then again, that sated appetite may have had something to do with going face-down in the potato beignet and the whipped cod's roe at the start.

To finish, from both menus, there was a house brick of extremely adult tiramisu, the thick layers of sponge sodden with both site-specific Bristol Cream and enough espresso to stimulate a dozy sloth into bouts of calisthenics. Or have the frangipane tart with the deep purple reveal of sliced fresh figs, in a pond of custard and cream, masking shards of sugary crunch. Service was attentive, but then it would be because, shockingly, we were the only diners this lunchtime. It barely needs saying that Bristol is a superb restaurant city, full of independents serving great food without faff or ludicrous ponce. The establishment at 1 York Place sums up that encouragingly bourgeois approach. For a while the rain had abated, but now the director appears to have called action and once more it is sloshing down. It's as if the weather is telling us to stay put. If only we could. ■

Notes on chocolate

Courses in bread and chocolate to leave you full in every way. By *Annalisa Barbieri*



Some exciting news. **Pump Street**, my local bean-to-bar chocolate maker, is launching the Workshop. For those keen on an experience, classes started three days ago and will be based at the PS Bakery in Orford in Suffolk. (Orford is a great place to visit anyway and do try to factor in a trip to Orford Ness if you can.)

There are basically two types of workshop. The first is called Exploring Craft Chocolate (£95). It's a two-hour course in which you learn all about bean-to-bar chocolate, taste chocolate and load a grinder up with nibs and sugar to see how chocolate is made. Then you take tempered chocolate and make your own bars with inclusions such as croissant or cookie crumb (or both!), or fruits and nuts – and you take two bars home.

The second is not about chocolate but is about Understanding Sourdough, a workshop that costs £195 and takes five hours (lunch is included). You learn about grain, milling and mixing bread. You bake some bread and then take your very own sourdough to cook at home in a banneton, later. There's also after-course support in the form of a WhatsApp group.

If you can't get there, do look at Pump Street's Rare Batch box, from £38 on subscription. This is a box that is sent every other month with full-size chocolate bars, baked goods involving chocolate and a rare treat of some sort, which could be the chocolate, the baked good or something else! It's a gorgeous box with notes to get you thinking, maybe baking and definitely eating.



Wines of the week

Stone-fruited wines made from marsanne and roussanne.

By *David Williams*

@Daveydaibach

Wildstone Reserva Roussanne, Colchagua Valley Chile 2024
£8, Waitrose

There are white wines that zap and thrill with a trill of electric acidity, wines that are all about crispness, brightness, energy and verve. But white wines can also charm in other

ways, offering something softer, rounder, fuller and richer – wines that tend, in their flavours, towards stone fruits, pears, ripe apples and quince, rather than the citrusy and the green, and which, as a result, tend to chime with a season when we seek ballast against the cold to complement richer food. Made by Luis Felipe Edwards, one of Chile's club of big, export-focused producers, the Wildstone Reserva Roussanne, a new entry in the new to Waitrose, fulfils those requirements beautifully. With a mouthfilling, fleshy peach and pear succulence, it's a superb-value autumnal white.

M&S Chez Michel Collines Rhodaniennes Marsanne France 2023
£9, Marks & Spencer

Roussanne is rarely seen without its traditional, rhyming partner, marsanne. The roussanne-marsanne blend is the heart of many a wine in France's northern Rhône Valley

where both varieties originate. Like roussanne, solo marsanne makes fuller-bodied, autumnal wines which retain fresh and floral tones, on show in two other highlights of supermarket ranges. M&S's Chez Michel is a delightful marsanne from the Rhône's Cave de Tain l'Hermitage co-operative: a wine that combines ripe pear and white peach, blossomy scents and a touch of bitterness; Paul Mas Marsanne, IGP Pays d'Oc, France 2023 (£8.50, Asda) gives the variety a sunny southern French lilt, with riper stone fruit leaning into tropical and a soft-focus honeyed touch.



Tahbilk Marsanne, Nagambie Lakes, Victoria Australia 2022
£14.50, *HiC; Hard to Find Wines*

As far as Rhône varieties go, syrah (or under its Australian moniker, shiraz) dwarfs Australian plantings of marsanne and roussanne. But, Tahbilk, a producer with a 164-year history, has

access to some of the oldest marsanne vines in the world in its home in Victoria. In the latest vintage, there is a lovely flicker of herb and fennel under its fabulous pear and pithy citrus – and it's a wine that can happily age for many years. Also capable of adding layers over time, but in superb nick right now, is the fluent, ripe, yellow-plum-fruited 70/30 marsanne/roussanne blend that is Maxime Graillet Domaine des Lises Crozes-Hermitage Blanc 2023 (£40.25, *yapp.co.uk*), a rare, low-production sister wine to the same producer's red Crozes-Hermitage I recommended a couple of weeks back, and every bit as silky good.



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Spots £220, boden.co.uk

My life is a juggling act - but HRT and hot baths help

Stacey Duguid on her trials, tribulations - and triumphs - as she looks to manage menopausal symptoms while keeping everyday life on track



I've been on and off HRT like a teenager on a rollercoaster. Slapping an oestrogen-loaded patch in the direction of my right buttock over this past year, I've approached HRT like a new lover. Vigorous enthusiasm at first, thanks to feeling generally more alive, you know, down "there", I've even rediscovered the desire to masturbate! Dusting off my vibrator one morning, I could have high-fived the mirror in celebration. Two whole orgasms in a month instead of the recent none whatsoever. Not all women experience a surge in their sex drive while on HRT, but bearing in mind I used to have a razz on my vibrator daily - regular orgasms have health benefits, such as improved skin and stress release - my orgasm hiatus came as a shock. In menopause, my sex drive plummeted to non-existent.

As with all new lovers, the shiny excitement begins to dull after a while, and soon enough, you find yourself staring at the mirror, wondering where you went. My HRT dose, it turned out, was far too high, and so, after a few weeks, when water retention began to make me look, and feel, like an overstretched sausage, bloated and annoyed at having

'Telling a woman with a lot on her plate to add extra protein to her literal plate is a recipe for disaster'

gained circa 10lb in a month, I shoved the sticky little dots to the back of the drawer. "There must be an alternative," I wailed down the phone to an American friend whose medicine cabinet is so well stocked she could set up her own A&E. Well, yes and no, was the conclusion we drew after an hour of debating natural hormones over synthetic.

Off HRT for a while, I tackled the bloat with Epsom salts from Sea Magik. I added a couple of cups to my bath, and after about 20 minutes, a feeling of calm washed over me. I don't usually have baths, so one could argue it was the warm water that soothed away the day; however, I took an Epsom salt bath every third day in the run-up to my 50th birthday and felt far less bloated for it. If you like a whiff of scent while you soak, check out Margaret Dabbs, one of my favourite go-to brands, for relaxing lavender bath salts. And pamper yourself with the foot cream and lotions - a treat for dry, cracked heels.

Of course, sleep, good food, exercise and a doctor's prescription are just what the menopause practitioner ordered, but it can take a while to get the hormones and lifestyle balance correct. Hence, my blowing up like a sausage served at a greasy-spoon cafe -

wrong dose, wrong meds (the doc didn't prescribe progesterone, which, allegedly, is essential while on an increased dose of oestrogen). Yikes, but at least the regular long baths finally rid my bum of the unsightly, impossible-to-remove glue stains that HRT patches leave on your ass for ever, infinitum.

Eating well should be an easy fix but life's never that simple. It's all good and well, telling a middle-aged woman to eat plenty of greens and up her protein intake; but the reality is teenagers arguing, parents needing attention, and multiple work demands, not to mention keeping spending within overdraft limits - all this can throw us off track. Telling a woman with a lot on her plate to add extra protein to her literal plate is a recipe for disaster.

I used to be hopeless at taking supplements, but now I can feel my body needs more than hummus and rice cakes washed down with coffee - I sense a tiredness and my hair is thinning. So I've started taking a fantastic supplement called Prime Fifty Menopause Support. I've also added the brand's skin, hair and nails supplements because my nails often flake back to the nailbed, which hurts.

After my four-week HRT detox, I returned to the doctor, who put me on a lower dose of HRT and a nightly dose of progesterone. This, the Epsom salts and the supplements, plus my latest discovery, the Fine Bedding Company smart temperature pillow, are all helping. These finds are from QVC's Menopause Your Way destination, where women experiencing menopause, whether taking HRT or not, can check out solutions to ease their symptoms.

Managing signs of menopause, it turns out, is an ever-changing juggling act. Still, at least it's one we can control. Unlike unruly teens.

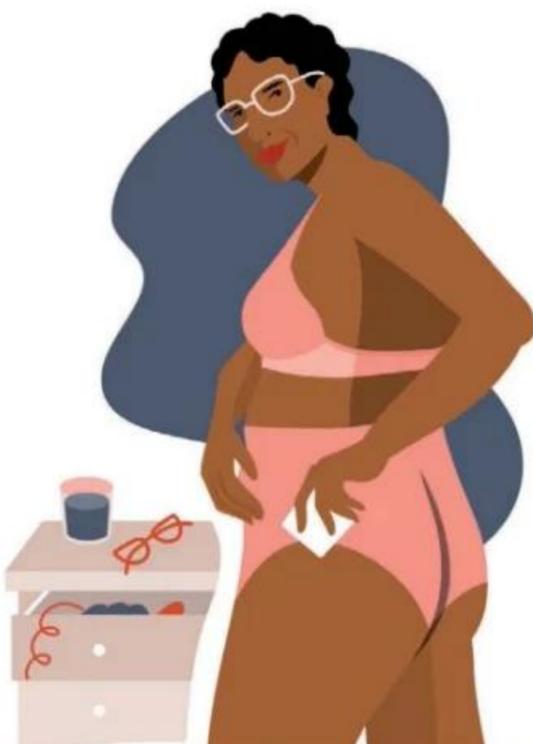
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Full and lush lashes to finish your look

Recently, I read that gen Z is no longer wearing mascara. This, I'm sure, is simply a headline-grabbing mass generalisation. Nevertheless, I thought, great for them. For everyone else, fuller lashes – which is what a good mascara gives you – make you look more awake, balance out the face and, I find, reduce the need for tons of makeup. So, hold on to your mascara – but not for more than three months – or get natural-looking lash extensions at Nails & Brows in London's Mayfair. They last at least a fortnight and are a time-saving game-changer.

1. **Sculpted By Aimee LashLift Mascara** £20, sculptedbyaimee.com
2. **Chanel Le Volume De Chanel Mascara** £36, chanel.com
3. **Carolina Herrera Fabulous Eyes Mascara** £35, johnlewis.com
4. **Givenchy L'Interdit Couture Volume Mascara** £34, givenchybeauty.com
5. **L'Oréal Panorama Mascara** £12.99, boots.com



I can't do without...

A beautiful classic fragrance inspired by love and memories

La Pyae Apothecary Catch Me If I Fall eau de parfum
£185 lapyae.com

How much you love a perfume is all to do with the actual scent. Sometimes, however, falling in love with a fragrance has nothing to do with its smell. It is about the premise. Such is the case with La Pyae Apothecary (pronounced LA -PEE-YAY, it translates as 'full moon' in Burmese). Aeons ago, the founder, Kathleen Baird Murray, a well-respected beauty journalist, confided in me that following a trip to Burma, where she reconnected with her mother's family after a 50-year separation, she would begin the process of creating a scent that paid homage to her heritage. I was moved and excited by her concept. And so I fell in love with the scent long before I smelt a single note. Fast forward a few years and her idea is no longer a pipe dream. Catch Me If I Fall, the first iteration of the brand created with the lauded perfumer Frank Voelkl, has launched. It is inspired by Myanmar – the dusty roads, sandalwood prayer beads and delicate strings of jasmine women wear in their hair – hence the notes include cedar and sandalwood, neroli, cardamom, bergamot and, of course, jasmine. It is beautiful. But beyond the scent, I love the thought behind it. Baird Murray says it is a fragrance about 'love and knowing someone loves you unconditionally, however far away'. And love is exactly what the world needs now.



On my radar

Creams to keep eyes and skin fully hydrated

Bright eyes

Google searches for eye creams have never been higher. We are all tired. CeraVe's new brightening and hydrating eye cream should help. **CeraVe Skin Renewing Eye Cream, £23, boots.com**



Layers of perfection

Forget the heavy mask-like foundations of old. With this skin tint (available in a plethora of shades), Dolce & Gabbana Blueberry Nutri-Tint Hydra-Glow & Fresh Skin Tint, £43, sephora.co.uk



Body of evidence

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Words BEMI SHAW



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We've all heard about how overcrowded Venice is, with the local government introducing a visitor tax to try to reduce day-trippers. With its 20m visitors a year, is it even possible to experience Venice in a more mindful way? I've been to the city many times, including research trips for my latest novel, *The Glassmaker*. Here are my top tips on how to have a less-crowded, more interesting encounter.

Go when the crowds don't

Visit in November or January. During these months the city breathes out and becomes much friendlier. For a lively winter meal, go to Mario alla Fava. It's one of the first restaurants in Venice to offer vegan choices, I go for its seafood and mix of locals and tourists. Afterwards, go for a wander: the best times to walk around Venice without crowds are early morning and late evening.

Leave your phone behind for a day

You don't need a map – just wander and let yourself get lost. You'll find all sorts of unexpected places, and eventually you'll reach water and you can take a vaporetto back. No phone also means no photographs. Everything in Venice is photogenic, yet when you look back through photos later none will be spectacular. Let go of the need to preserve those beautiful scenes and just enjoy them in the moment. I particularly recommend the passages off Via Garibaldi, where you'll see laundry hanging out and kids playing football.

Go backstage at the Doge's Palace

Take the Secret Itineraries tour, which you book in advance (palazzoducale.visitmuve.it). Not only do you bypass the long entry queues and gain access to the whole palace, you also get to go up to the attic cells where prisoners, such as Casanova, were held. You even walk over the Bridge of Sighs.

Try your hand on the water

Kayaking in canals is a magical way to experience Venice the way it was built, with its orientation around water. Most of the buildings had their main entrances on canals, which you only see when you're down low in the water itself. We went at sunset with Real Venetian Kayak. As part of my research for *The Glassmaker*, I also had fun trying out rowing in the Venetian style – standing up and facing forward – with Row Venice, a group of women who are passionate about boats.

Go during the Art Biennale

Every two years, Venice hosts art from all over the world for eight months. While there are two main sites that you pay to go into, for me the best part of the Biennale is the many free art installations



Mass appeal

The bestselling novelist reveals how to rediscover the wonders of a crowd-free Venice

Words TRACY CHEVALIER

scattered throughout the city. They are often housed in buildings that you would never see otherwise: private palazzos, courtyards, libraries, schools. Whatever you think of the variable art, the settings are spectacular and give you a sense of the Venice behind closed doors.

Visit an empty museum

Venetian museums are often overlooked, as visitors are seduced by the canals, squares and fancy exteriors. That's a shame, as some are corkers. For a taste of what it was like to live in a palazzo, try Ca' Rezzonico and Ca' D'Oro, both of which also have excellent art collections. I have a special fondness for Palazzo Mocenigo, with its collection of 17th- and 18th-century fashion, especially its



Drift away: (clockwise from above) a gondola on the canal at the Bridge of Sighs, as seen from Ponte della Paglia; the Throne Room at the Ca' Rezzonico Palace; kayaking along the Rio della Pergola in Santa Croce

cabinet of fancy embroidered waistcoats. Close by is La Zucca, a cosy vegetarian restaurant and one of my favourites.

Find a view

It can be claustrophobic walking through narrow passageways with so many people around. To get above the city for a bird's eye perspective, the most obvious place is the campanile in St Mark's Square, where the views are spectacular, but there's always a long queue. Two alternatives: the Scala Contarini del Bovolo has the most famous staircase in Venice – an ornate exterior spiral leading up to a terrace with lovely views. It's never been crowded when I've visited, possibly because it's tricky to find. Second, the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. For centuries, the German merchants' quarters, it's a grand four-storey building near the Rialto Bridge that's been turned into a luxury department store. It has a gorgeous interior courtyard and a rooftop with panoramic views you can access for free (it's popular, so book ahead). One of my favourite hotels, Locanda Fiorita, has a roof terrace with lovely views and free prosecco every evening.

Escape to the outer islands

The main island of Venice is surrounded by smaller islands. The glass island

Murano, the lace island Burano, the cemetery island San Michele, and the ruins of Torcello are the best known. But there are many others accessible by vaporetto, with fewer crowds and interesting sites. Try Sant'Erasmus, where most Venetian vegetables are grown; San Servolo, with its Insane Asylum Museum and Lazzaro degli Armeni, with its beautiful Armenian monastery (by guided tour only, so reserve), or simply head across to Giudecca, the island opposite St Mark's Square and eat at Altanella – a traditional trattoria with a gorgeous canalside terrace.

Make a glass bead

The glass island of Murano has countless demonstrations of glassblowing and many shops to browse, as well as a cracking glass museum. But there's nothing like creating something for yourself to make you appreciate the immense skill of the glass maestros. My novel focuses on a woman who makes glass beads and for research I had two lessons with Alessia Fuga, a brilliant beadmaker and patient teacher.

Appreciate the artisans

Venice has always been full of skilled artisans, making glassware, leather,



boats, masks and paper. Many small workshops are still scattered throughout the city where you can watch the artisans at work and buy unique souvenirs, knowing that you are contributing to a precious local economy. Look out for Gualti, whose shop in Dorsoduro is full of jewellery and textiles inspired by natural forms; Gianni Basso's printing shop in Cannaregio, where you can order bespoke business cards and admire his old printing presses (he is so old-school he has no website and takes only cash); and Micromega eyewear in San Marco, which sells unique, often asymmetrical, glasses that are designed by a father-and-son team. ■

The Glassmaker by Tracy Chevalier is published by the Borough Press (£20). Buy a copy for £17 from guardianbookshop.com

Self & wellbeing

Illustration EVA BEE

The dark months make nature hard to access, but these simple exercises put you in touch with it

Words MILES RICHARDSON

As the clocks go back today, it's worth remembering that even though we may consider ourselves to be a nation of nature lovers, in a recent study people in the UK were found to be more disconnected from the natural world than most of our European neighbours. And the result is a decline not just in nature's wellbeing but in ours, too. And, though it's harder to get out and enjoy nature with longer nights and shorter days, the good news is that a new relationship with nature can start very simply, with eight everyday activities close to home.

1. Actively notice nature

It's easy to pass birds without really seeing them or to walk through a park without paying attention to the trees. We can become so caught up in our own thoughts that we miss the sensory gifts nature has to offer. By tuning in to the sights, sounds and sensations around us, by listening to the birds, we can transform passive wandering into an immersive experience. When we truly notice nature, something magical happens. We start to appreciate its beauty, find meaning in its existence and feel a positive change in our emotions.

Activity: The first activity I developed when teaching nature awareness at the University of Derby was simply "Noticing three good things in nature each day." The concept is super-easy, but it is an essential step to reclaiming our inherent connection to the natural world. Every day for a week, write down three good things in nature that you notice each day. These can be small things noted in a given moment – the song of a robin or the movement of a tree in the breeze – or wider aspects of the diversity and wonder of the world around you.

2. Night and day

Just as we evolved to make sense of the natural world, we became deeply in tune with the rhythms of the day. The biological clock in our brains is connected to our retinas, so daylight is a cue that calibrates our circadian rhythm, regulating sleep and wakefulness. Through such systems, light affects the brain's alertness and emotional regulation, reducing stress and enhancing wellbeing.

Activity: As darkness creeps across the sky, put your coat on, get outside and go on a dusk walk. Watch the colours change as the light fades and be on the lookout for the bright dot of a star or planet. Listen for the changing sounds, alarm calls as birds head to roost, perhaps an owl's hoot being carried on the cooling air.

3. The soft fascination of nature

Nature's sights, sounds and textures can capture our attention in a unique and undemanding way, providing a soft fascination that can give our overstimulated minds some vital down time. Just 40 seconds of gently viewing nature can foster an effortless sense of calm, by



'Find a bench where there will be a view of leaves falling. Let the sights and sounds around you capture your attention'

freeing us from the demands of having to pay attention and allowing our brains to rest and recover.

Activity: Find a bench where you feel comfortable and where there will be a view of leaves falling. Take in the trees and let the sights, sounds and textures around you capture your attention as autumn leaves fall. Nature keeps giving and there is a depth to it not often found in the manufactured products of our human world.

4. The joy of birds

Birds hold great cultural and spiritual significance for us. Their flight has long been associated with the human aspiration to break free from our earth-bound

There's no need for a pair of binoculars or guide to bird species

limitations, while their migrations each spring are a symbol of renewal. Birdsong is the natural sound linked most strongly to reducing stress. The richer and more various the birds in an area, the greater local people's satisfaction with life.

Activity: Find a place where

birds are present. Spend a few minutes of your day or week allowing yourself to be enchanted by the wonder of flight and the joy of birds. There's no need for a pair of binoculars or a guide to different species; we're not birdwatching in the traditional sense. Joy-watching birds is simply about taking delight in birds' presence, their movement and actions, appreciating their community and vitality. In our studies, when we compared joy-watching birds to identifying and counting birds, those who simply focused on the pleasure of it reported the greatest improvement in wellbeing.

5. Invisible friends

Humans are, quite literally, a walking symbiotic community relying on continual interactions both internal and external. Trillions of micro-organisms, such as bacteria, fungi and viruses, live on and within us, and the vast majority of them are good for us. So it seems very strange that we are encouraged to banish bacteria from our homes and bodies. Unprocessed whole foods often contain good bacteria, as does the soil they grew in. Even growing lettuce indoors has been found to provide a meaningful boost in bacterial diversity, which is important for the function of the immune system.

Activity: This simple activity is as fundamental as they come. Visit the most ancient woodland you can easily reach. For a few minutes, breathe in through your nose, counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter and your chest rise and hold your breath for another count of four. Slowly breathe out through your mouth for a count of four. With each breath, focus on the fresh scents and smells around you. Feel the air fill your lungs.

6. Flower power

Can a single element of nature offer the basis of wellbeing? The diversity of the natural world is immense and, by extension, our connections to nature are so numerous it can be difficult to keep abreast of them. Sometimes it helps to home in. Research has investigated the impact on our bodies of viewing a single flower and has found that both blood pressure

and stress levels decrease. The change is detectable after just a few seconds.

Focus on fresh scents around you. Feel the air filling your lungs

Activity: Find a flower and simply gaze at it for a few minutes. Wonder at how such a delicate bloom can change the physiology of your body. Consider the meaning of wildflowers, how they can represent particular emotions, myths or traditions. Some

wildflowers can evoke a sense of identity, representing the lands where they bloom. You may also have your own personal memories of a flower and its scent that is unique to you.

7. Look after nature

The natural world is more than a pill to pop for our own wellbeing. A sustainable future for our planet requires that we look after nature just as nature looks after us. **Activity:** If you have a garden, there's always an urge to clear away the remnants of summer and the fallen leaves of autumn. Similarly, you may see your local park or community space being tidied. Yet the "mess" can be a haven for wildlife. Here are three tips for nurturing some natural habitats in the hope of helping insects, birds and small mammals through the winter. First, allow the edges of your garden to be a little wild. Unruly plants, long grass and tangled shrubs can all provide shelter. Second, leave some seed heads: don't deadhead or cut back all flowers, especially seed heads such as sunflowers and teasels that provide a seasonal feast for birds. Third, resist the urge to tidy away every leaf and twig. Amass a pile in a secluded corner, under hedges or bushes, or in a log pile, to provide additional shelter, insulation or even a spot for a hedgehog to hibernate. Remember, the more we can help wildlife through the winter, the more there will be to enjoy next spring.

8. Keep noticing

Like any relationship, a deep connection to the rest of nature requires some dedication. **Activity:** Pause regularly during your busy life, in the city or the countryside, and take the effort to notice everything around you – each bird, tree and flower. These simple pleasures can be enjoyed every day. Let nature win the battle for attention that is ever present in our lives. ■

The Blackbird's Song & Other Wonders of Nature by Miles Richardson is published by New River at £14.99. Buy a copy from guardianbookshop at £13.49

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Séamas O'Reilly

For my son, I've ceased to be the font of all useful knowledge. Now, he asks a higher authority

@shockproofbeats



'I have questions,' my son says, as I pick him up from school. He's just received a light scolding from me, because of an email I got from his school. 'This is to let you know,' they wrote, 'that although you have consented for your child to receive the flu nasal spray vaccination, they did not receive it.'

For a few seconds, I entertained the idea that they'd simply run out of vaccines. Or maybe he had been in the bathroom while they were being doled out. I pictured these doses being administered by a team of nurses who had another, more pressing, engagement scheduled three minutes later, and thus jabbed the nostrils of everyone in the class in 90 seconds, with the buzzing alacrity of a Formula One pit crew.

Sadly, such hopes were dashed by a pleasant phone call to the school's office, moments later. 'It's OK,' they told me brightly, 'it's just that he didn't want to do it, so he refused.' I must admit

I was unaware that this was something you could do. As a six-year-old, the idea of refusing to do anything was alien to me. My entire childhood was, I now realise, spent constantly doing things I didn't want to do, simply because grownups told me. My son has no such overweening sense of adult authority. Where once I was the font of all knowledge, he now considers asking me a question little more than a polite act of preliminary inquiry, before he seeks the actual truth by asking the very same question of the Alexa in our kitchen. He is, in a sense, the platonic idea of a questioning child, a boy who does his own research. In some sense, I admire this independence of nature, I just wish it wasn't on a topic that might make his teachers think I'm feeding him a nonstop diet of Infowars at home.

'If I'm not sick, why do I need it?' he asks me on the walk home, and I try to explain both cause and effect, and the linear nature of time, to a six-year-old who's becoming

more conspiratorial by the second. I tell him he did actually have the flu once, when he was very little, and that I've had it several times, in fact it's interesting to point out that... 'How bad is it?' he says, cutting me off. I ponder where on the scale between 'It's like a very, very bad cold' and '17-50 million people died of one outbreak of Spanish flu in 1918' I should pitch my answer.

'It's horrible,' I tell him, 'you feel weak and sore and rubbish – and this spray will stop you from getting it again.'

'So the flu is worse than getting water up your nose?' he asks, once we arrive at home. 'Yes,' I say. 'It's significantly worse than getting water up your nose.'

'Hmm,' he says. His brow knits as he thinks for a moment. I feel I've got through to him and that maybe some semblance of my authority has been restored. 'Alexa,' he shouts, breaking all such illusions, 'is getting the flu worse than getting water up your nose?'

Ask Philippa

I left my husband after he raped me, but our daughter resents me



@Philippa_Perry



Sunday with...

Actor Tobias Menzies on eggs and cold water

Sunday plans? I've really got into cold-water swimming, so that's often how I start my Sundays. I try to get up not too late and head to London's Hampstead Heath. There are three natural ponds – a women's, men's and mixed. I have a year's pass.

Isn't it chilly? The coldest I got down to was 3C last winter. I don't like wetsuits – it's getting cold that I've become slightly addicted to. The adrenaline hit afterwards is incredible.

Then what? There's a couple of good places near the Heath for eggs on toast. Breakfast has to be eggs – and good coffee.

Sunday housework? I've become a lot better at domestics. I don't find it easy to think if there's a mess. If I need to do some work, I'll have to do the washing up first, or sort out the garden.

Any particular bit? I like doing it all, in a horribly bourgeois way. I'm a big fan

of a nice curated lawn, but I also like a bit of wildness. Then I might have to learn some lines.

Any special technique? I have to walk with them, which is lucky, living so close to the Heath. I'll be muttering my lines; people probably think I'm mad. It's better than sitting learning them.

Sunday evening? Maybe find a friend for a drink. There's a lovely pub called the Tufnell Park Tavern just up the road. It's big and there's always room and there's no music, which is a bête noire of mine.

How come? Sonically, it's just a bit of a stack up. I want to hear what's going on, have a chat. I sound so old saying that!

Monday dread? It depends how the job's going. If it's hard then you're like: 'I've got to get back in there.' The fact that my Sundays no longer involve homework is nice.

Rich Pelley

Tobias Menzies stars in *The Other Place* at the National Theatre until 9 November



The question I am in my late 50s. I left my husband to be with my new partner some years ago. Our daughter is now an adult. The problem is that my daughter resents me for leaving her father, and she is so rude to my partner.

I've kept from her the fact that her father raped me. It was once. I felt nobody would take this seriously. We'd been married a long time and one night I woke up to him having sex with me. He had my arms pinned above my head. I asked him to stop, I was crying and he carried on. The next day he said we'd both "got a bit carried away" and he wouldn't listen to what my experience was.

Can it be rape, as it was only once, after we'd had consensual sex numerous times? After that, I just did not want to be with him any more. It feels so silly a reason as it only happened once, but I know it isn't. I'm so confused. I found my new partner, who is lovely and kind, and I managed to leave my husband. But my daughter judges me terribly for leaving him. She favours my ex-husband. He is always invited to stay with her, but I am not. I don't want to tell my daughter her father raped me, but don't know how to get her to understand why I left him. He is a charismatic man, very popular, but when we were alone, he could be, and often was, controlling and cold towards me, which I put up with. I minimise the incident in my mind as it was only once.

Philippa's answer It was rape, you did not consent to it. And once is enough to know that he valued his power over you more than your comfort and autonomy. Once is enough to know you were not respected as a person but used as an object. This once was also the proof you needed – after enduring his controlling and cold nature for many years – that you had to break free.

You have lived a life of quiet suffering, enduring the tyranny of your former husband and yet, despite the weight of such oppression that was probably shattering your confidence, you summoned the courage to leave. This act is a triumph of the self over the forces that

sought to diminish it. You chose life, you chose freedom and this choice is sacred. Do not let the judgments of others, even your daughter, trap you in the nets of guilt.

Your daughter pities her father, because she cannot comprehend your escape. She sees only the fracture in the family and not your liberation from coldness and control. It sounds as if she has cast you as a villain and your former husband as a victim; don't be ensnared by this simplistic framework. Don't linger over what you have lost, instead, see what you have gained: your life,

You could let your daughter know you were deeply unhappy

me and makes me happy, and I need you to respect that."

I admire you for not trying to alienate your daughter from her father. You don't have to think your reasons for leaving were not enough – they were. It is the weight of her judgment that makes you feel otherwise and she doesn't know your side of the story. You may be prioritising your daughter's feelings about her father over your own need for healing and understanding. But if you continue to try to downplay what happened in your mind, it will be hard to resolve things with her.

You don't have to tell your daughter every detail to help her understand why you left her father. You could let her know that the marriage had problems and that you were deeply unhappy, and that for your own wellbeing, you needed to leave. You could gently tell her you often experienced him as controlling and cold towards you. That would be owning your experience, your truth, but it isn't as alienating as just name-calling him as coercive.

It's not uncommon for children to take the side of the "wronged" parent, especially when they see one parent suffering after a breakup. But it's also important to remember she doesn't have the full picture. Her judgment isn't about you as a person, but about her understanding of events. You might try sharing your truth in a way that doesn't attack her father, but asserts your need for respect. If you decide to reveal the truth, do so without shame, without hesitation as a warrior reveals their scars, not in search of pity or absolution, but as proof of your battle, your survival. You deserve to feel your decision to leave is justified because it was. ■

If these issues have affected you, contact rapecrisis.co.uk

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

Go with the slow *



loaf

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