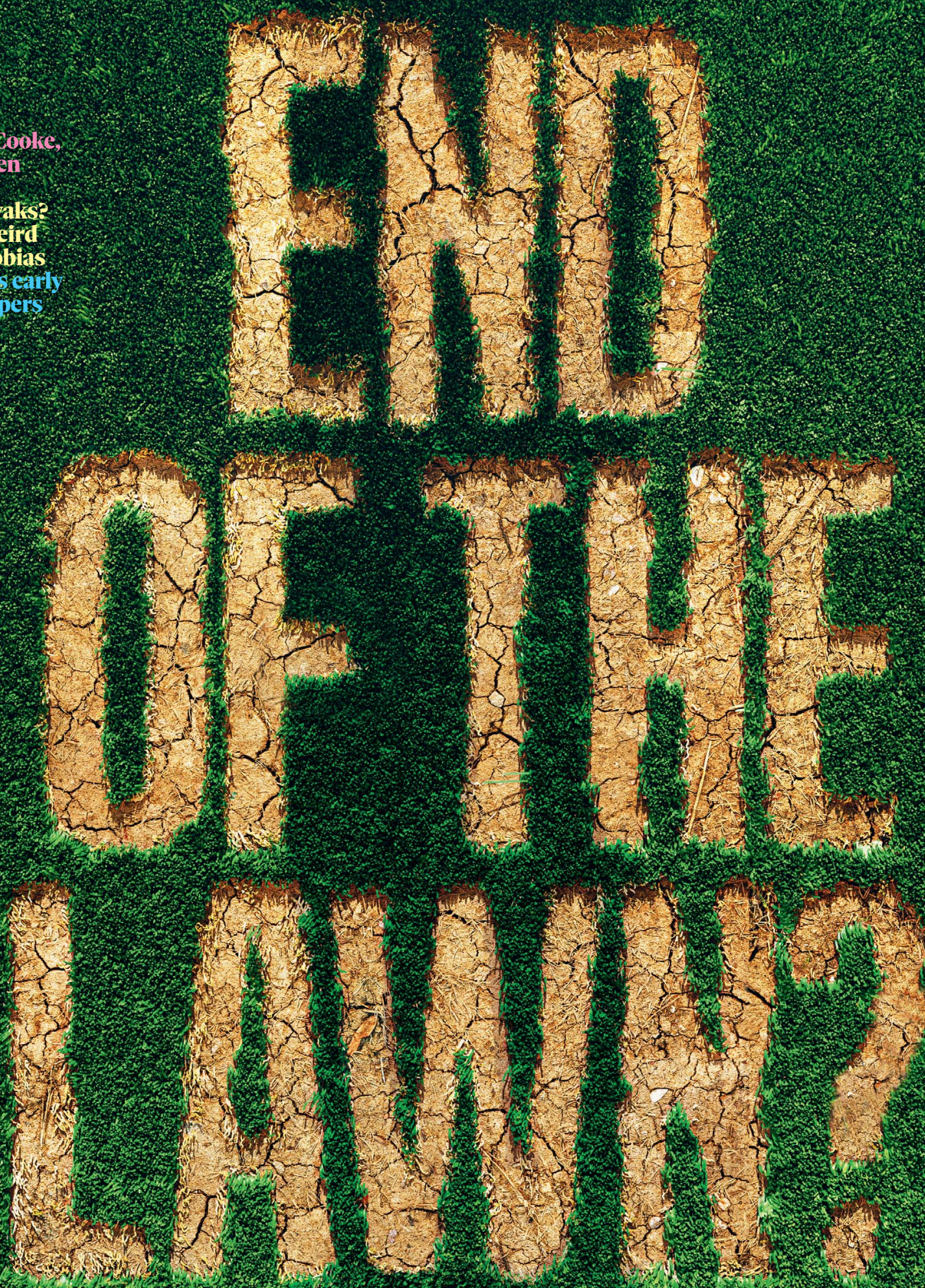


2 OCTOBER 2022

# *The Observer Magazine*

Meet Olivia Cooke,  
the new queen  
of Westeros  
Clowns? Kayaks?  
Inside the weird  
world of phobias  
Nigel Slater's early  
autumn suppers



Why ever hotter summers mean it's time to rethink the future of grass



# Charlie's always causing a stir



He doesn't stop improving his dishes until he's found the perfect balance and blend of flavour, no matter how long it takes or how much trouble it causes in the kitchen. Isn't that right, Charlie?

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**Charlie Bigham's**  
Obsession is my secret ingredient



# The Observer Magazine



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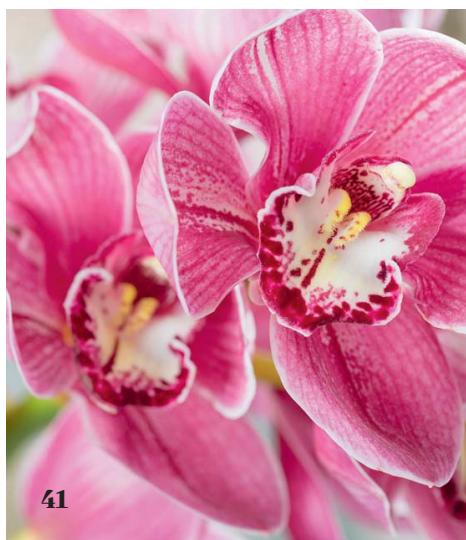
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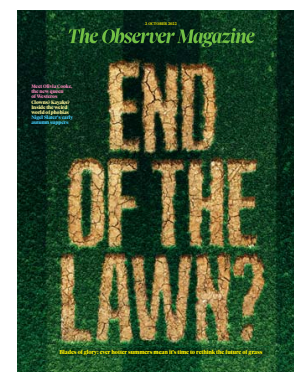
**Pragya Agarwal** lives in the northwest with her family. She is a professor of social inequities and a behavioural and data scientist. She's also the author of four books on racism, gender bias and motherhood. Read her brilliant piece about screaming (p23).



Having travelled the world and worked at the Oscars, the Met Ball and Cannes, hairstylist **George Northwood** started working with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. He was responsible for the Duchess's evening bridal hair at their wedding and has toured extensively with the couple. This week, he worked with actor Olivia Cooke to create her amazing look (p14).



**Kate Summerscale** lives in London and is the author of the number one bestseller *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*. Her latest book, *The Haunting of Alma Fielding*, was shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction. She has long been fascinated by stories of everyday obsession, particularly phobias and manias, a subject she explores in this issue (p20).



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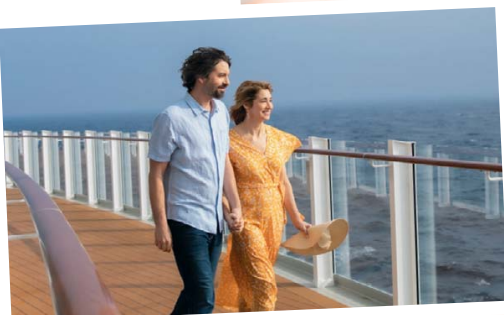
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# Eva Wiseman

## Watching a burglary unfold brings home a sad realisation



🐦 @evawiseman



### From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

On the eve of the 1965 French presidential election, the *Observer Magazine* (28 November 1965) headed across the Channel for a special edition on the cultural and social phenomenon of Young France: what had changed now 'one Frenchman in three is under 20'?

Adolescent revolt in France was judged 'surprisingly docile' and French teens were 'on the whole harmless. They do not bother with strong drink. Their fads are far less outlandish than the exotic hairstyles and far-out clothes of their British counterparts.' Yet the student-led revolt of May 68 would hit France like a Molotov cocktail chucked over a barricade only three years later.

Then as now, Gallic fashion skewed classic, not subversive. Glossy-haired girls were photographed in 'English tweed and Shetland' and neatly buttoned wool coats. The boys 'hanker... after Anglo-Italian elegance' and, sweetly, a recent craze for umbrellas had 'boosted

production of black brollies'.

A report on the antics and exceptionalism of the gilded youth of the Ecole Polytechnique, the Oxford PPE of French life, has shades of the Bullingdon. Thankfully, le rock'n'roll was injecting a soupçon of sex and danger into Gallic life. French teens ('Les Yé-yé as the adults call them, half contemptuously, half enviously') were grooving to the Beatles, Stones and Dylan like their UK counterparts but, of course, Johnny Halliday got a mention. 'President de Gaulle has listened to Johnny Halliday at least once. He is reported to have remarked with approval: "It's noisy, like an army band."'

A dictionary of French teen slang also helpfully provided key phrases to be with it (dans le coup): 'Ca chauffe: the rhythm is hot', 'Ca a fait tilt: we hit it off' and 'Smart: smart.'

Three weeks later, de Gaulle, then aged 75, won the election. The French youthquake wasn't a done deal quite yet. **Emma Beddington**

It took a couple of hours before my parents realised they'd been burgled. We'd been at my niece's fourth birthday party in a local church hall, an afternoon orgy of caterpillar cake and balloons, though it had been touch and go for a while whether the party would go ahead. The church people had called my brother-in-law the week before to cancel, because: "The Queen is dead?" He'd heard, actually. They agreed eventually to consult with the elders and finally rung back to say the party could happen, but only if all the children were sure to remain respectfully quiet throughout. "No problem!" everybody lied.

I've always been typically eye-rolling about those dystopian doorbell cameras. Quite aside from the way they seem to be Pied Piper home-owners into a suburban surveillance state and the fact that they're creating a world where we are all adjusting to lives lived under a camera's gaze, all of the time, and sharing the data with the police and Amazon (a software engineer for whom wrote to management explaining their Ring doorbells were "simply not compatible with a free society"), the ring itself – three atonal dongs – is offensive in the extreme. A kid doing jazz. A pan falling into a sinkhole. Horrible. I will not start on the "dogs barking" ring option, because life is short and death is long, and that sound, of dogs getting excited in a faraway universe made of steel and robots, has not earned its space in the world's oldest Sunday paper. Anyway, my parents have one. Which is how, the evening of my niece's party, my mum (having realised her laptop was missing) and my dad (having found the toilet enthusiastically filled by bowels that were not his own) were able to send me the footage from that afternoon.

In anger and curiosity, and irritation at the power of the sentient doorbell, I pressed play. It begins with a curtain of pink as a man reaches over to cover the camera, but only briefly – he's distracted by his girlfriend, and after a second removes his hand, holding it behind his back like a waiter. I took a deep breath. These were the criminals. These were the burglars, preying on strangers in their 70s – they must have been watching the house, waiting two minutes after seeing my parents drive away before approaching the door. These were my enemies. Today's enemies, anyway.

The video is annoyingly clear. He is in his 30s, wearing a grey T-shirt and those Topman jeans that narrow cruelly at the calf; she's in a striped vest, arms bared, a sunken sort of glamour. She looks older than him, with long dark hair and eyeliner like mine. She's carrying a plastic shopping bag, arms crossed. Both are nervous. "What do you think?" she says. "What do you think?" They move around the doorstep like pigeons, shoulders up, propelled by something large and dark and heavier than choice. He shoves the door, looks through the letterbox. "Not much in there," she notes rudely, looking through the window. As he steps back to investigate the front of the house, she rocks slightly, hiding from the street – and that's where I pressed pause.

My fury had dissolved somewhere around the

30-second mark, I realised, and had been replaced with a less comfortable feeling, some cold, blue mix of pity and sadness and dread. These were not the career criminals I'd expected, there were no balaclavas, not even a pair of gloves. These were just... people. Desperate people. I remembered a recent news story – a national strategy paper, written in the summer, said police were concerned that "economic turmoil and financial instability" and "prolonged and painful economic pressure" had the "potential to drive increases in particular crime types", including "acquisitive" offences, such as burglary, as well as more insidious crimes, like sexual exploitation. Victims of domestic abuse, it warned, will become less likely to report their abuser because of an increased reliance on them. It's obvious, really, but it hit differently when I saw that desperation in action, on video: the adrenaline, the fear, the need.

The second video, 15 minutes later, shows the couple leaving quickly. This would have been around the time my niece's nursery-mates were bowling into the church hall, popping every single balloon before they'd even taken off their cardigans. The man exited first with the wheelee suitcase that I'd recently borrowed for a holiday, and the woman followed. She looked different now; it took a moment for me to realise she'd put her hair up, with one of my mum's chunky crocodile clips and she was wearing my mum's black coat, too. I called my parents after our second viewing. They were deliberating over whether to bother the police, and wondering how the cats had felt, and then, how to clean the toilet. We were just hanging up when I asked, "Why do you think she took your coat?" Did it have a wallet in the pocket? Was the coat valuable? No, said my mum, "I think she was just cold." ■

### One more thing...

I'm looking forward to reading *Which As You Know Means Violence*, **Philippa Snow's** book 'on self-injury as art and entertainment'. The title comes from a message that Hunter S Thompson left for the *Jackass* stuntman Johnny Knoxville, 'I will be looking to have some fun, which as you know usually means violence.'

Weeks later, I'm still enjoying the many, many great pieces written about **The Queue**. Conversations with the queuers about grief, community and meaning have unlocked a bank of empathy in me.

I visited **Are You Mad**, the first closed-loop high street plastic recycling experiment, which has collected more than a tonne of plastic waste from local businesses and turned it into cheeky, gorgeous furniture and products, like door handles, plant pots and bowls. They're doing plastic workshops in their recycling studio on Carnaby Street, London, into October – I recommend.





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# This much I know

*Manolo Blahnik, designer, 79*

Interview **MICHAEL SEGALOV**  
Photograph **STELLA MACDONALD**

**I was a pest**, an impossible child. I knew what I wanted, when and how, and refused to be told otherwise. It's fair to say little has changed – I'm still as stubborn as I've ever been.

**Shoes are in my DNA.** My mother loved them, my father, too. Still, my career was an accident – responsible was the late, great Diana Vreeland. We met by chance in New York; I was almost catatonic. She saw my drawings, looked me straight in the eye and said: "Young man, do shoes, you're very good at it."

**I'm a workaholic**, I'm at it nonstop. I can't comprehend the idea of retirement. I'll never get bored of creating; I'll never stop exploring new things. To be sitting

on the sofa watching TV and eating potato chips? It sounds hellish.

**Reading in the mornings** is good for the soul. Each page can inspire me in untold ways: the descriptions of food and of fashion; culture and nature. Mum used to read to us constantly. Now I do, too. Movies today are too quick. I need more time in these worlds.

**The death of the Queen** really broke me. It touched me so tremendously.

**I'm quieter** than you'd expect. When I talk it's very fast – few can keep up – and with friends I'll have vast conversations. But most of the time I am in silence.

**Ageing doesn't scare me**, but pain does. Recently I had a fall, and broke a leg and an arm. It really shook me. I'm not preoccupied with death itself. Losing

others, however, I find difficult. In August I lost my dear friend, the photographer Eric Boman. It's made me temporarily neurotic.

**Happiness?** I'm not sure I know what that is. Instead, I look for moments of bliss. For me, that comes from being in the middle of the countryside with my dogs. I'm addicted to my labradors. I love these creatures far more than people.

**I am sick of thinking about the past. It's the future that really speaks to me**

**Tell people to their face** if you don't like something. Don't do it cruelly, always try to be kind. I have a reputation for being hard to please, but that's the price of trying to reach perfection.

**We have reached** a state of mediocrity, it seems to me. Nobody is asking for more, striving for the beautiful, the new and the extraordinary.

**I'm sick of thinking** about the past. It's the future that really speaks to me. I'm still to reach my greatest achievements – that's still to come. I'm incredibly proud of my upcoming collections.

**I'm a loner** at heart, a solitary soul. I can't stand crowds or parties. I'll be on my own for my 80th birthday, and can't think of a better way to spend it. ■

[manoloblahnik.com](http://manoloblahnik.com)





why  
grass  
isn't  
cutting it



A man with light brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue zip-up jacket with 'Kew' and 'Royal Botanic Gardens' on the chest, olive green cargo pants, and brown leather boots. He is standing on a green lawn, leaning his right hand on a red and black lawnmower and his left hand on his hip. Behind him is a large clump of tall, golden-brown ornamental grasses. In the background, there are green trees and a glimpse of a building under a cloudy sky.

**'Lots of grasses have evolved in challenging environmental conditions': Joe Richomme, botanical horticulturalist at Kew Gardens**

**This summer saw vast tracts of parks and lawns scorched by drought in the UK, but more watering is not a sustainable solution. So what does the future hold for grass?**

*Words* **PATRICK BARKHAM** *Photographs* **KATE PETERS**



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John Bennett Lawes and Joseph Henry Gilbert were fired up by an unusual mission: how could they help grass grow? It was the heyday of the Victorian era and grass that was cut every summer for hay was the diesel of its day, feeding the horse-power that grew the food for industrial Britain. So, in 1856, Lawes, the owner of a stately home in Hertfordshire, and Gilbert, a chemist, divided seven acres of parkland into plots, fertilising some with manure, treating others with new synthetic fertilisers and leaving some patches alone before cutting each for hay to see which methods produced the highest yield.

The “park grass experiment” is still going today at Rothamsted, the oldest agricultural research station in the world. This summer, when a notoriously rain-drenched island off western Europe became a place of brown parks and yellow meadows, scientists revealed a startling new fact. Over the past century, during which a second agricultural revolution has boosted the efficacy of food production beyond the wildest imaginings of Victorian farmers, yields of hay from the lush Hertfordshire parkland have fallen by around 35%. Yields of spring hay – harvested in June – are forecast to plummet by a further 20% to 50% between 2020 and 2080.

It seems we have a problem with our grass.

We rely on grass in cities and in the countryside. Half of Britain’s green and pleasant land is covered by grasses – pasture, meadows, moorland, parks and lawns. Grassland managed for livestock grazing is the UK’s largest crop by area. Most of our animal protein is fed with grasses: pigs and chickens eat corn (a grass) and sheep and cattle directly graze grass. Amenity grassland in towns and cities is crucial for recreation and wellbeing.

But after this long, hot summer vast swaths of grass turned dusty brown – inedible to animals and unusable for people – highlighting just how much we rely on it, but also how vulnerable it can be. Can grass still thrive in an era of global heating?

One particular type of grass widely used in lawns, parks and farm pastures – ryegrass – is coming under new scrutiny for its inability to cope with dry spells and drought. Does grass have a future, particularly in the parched southeast corner of England? Should we sow more drought-resilient grass species – and if so, what are they? Or should we redesign our grassy parks, lawns and farming systems? How must grass change? And how must we change?

As I write this, the first rains since June to reach my part of east Norfolk are pattering down. Elsewhere in the southeast of England, a few weeks of showers have turned desolate beige parks a tinge of green again. There’s less discussion of drought in the west of England and Scotland, where it looks as green as ever, but between March and August even Wales experienced its third driest six-month period since records began in 1865.

Climatologists’ predictions of longer dry spells are coming to pass all over the world and societies tentatively



**‘Use the right grass species and, if it is healthy, your soils are healthy’**

inch towards adaptations. Is the end of the lawn nigh?

California aims to remove 500m square feet of lawns by 2030. In southern England, while Kew Gardens’ grass lawns turned brown all summer – the botanical gardens prioritising the watering of its precious live-plant collections – one area was unaffected: Kew’s collection of around 300 different living grass species from Asia, Africa and the Americas.

“Dry conditions aren’t a problem for most grasses really,” says Joe Richomme, botanical horticulturalist at Kew. It’s just that the temperate grasses we traditionally rely on for lawns and parks aren’t as good at coping with drought as others. “Lots of grasses have evolved in challenging environmental conditions. Grassland biomes are shaped by

**‘We have to change our mindsets. Sustainable lawn care is the easiest thing to do’: David Hedges-Gower of the Lawn Association; and grass testing in Oxfordshire**

wildfires, grazing by animals and by periods of seasonal drought. In the grass garden this year, throughout May and June where we had not much rain, and July where we had just 4mm, I only watered once and that was because I

lost my nerve. As soon as we had the rain, the grasses started growing again. They were fine.”

Could we add a bit of this grassy resilience to our domestic lawns? Richomme is interested to see if adding “warm season” tropical grasses to turf mixes might create a more drought-resistant lawn. “We’re going to be looking at doing some experiments with warm-season grasses being seeded into our turf to try and cover these drier periods that we are going to be having more of in the coming years,” he says. But it’s not a guaranteed fix: warm-season grasses could go dormant during cold winters, with frost creating brown patches just as the sun did this summer.

**Like Kew, the National Trust** has prioritised plants over lawns across most properties in the southeast. The traditional immaculately striped lawn of the stately home is loosening up. Mowing regimes are less frequent because longer grass is more resilient in dry spells. Ham House’s fine lawns have been planted with bulbs, which are followed by native wildflowers. The steep mown banks of Polesden Lacey have been allowed to grow long.

“They are as attractive, just in a different way,” says Emma McNamara, the Trust’s gardens and parks consultant for London and the southeast. McNamara points out that the trim characteristics of lawns are not immutable. “Historically, lawns used to be a much wider mix of low-growing, ground-cover plants,” she says. “Having daisies and other species is really lovely and slowly moving away from a single species of grass that you mow to death is a positive thing.”

Reactions to imperfect stately home lawns are mixed. “There’s a lot more understanding from visitors about how to garden more sustainably,” says McNamara. “Some say, ‘Thank goodness your grass looks like mine.’ Others ask, ‘Why are you not watering it?’ to which the answer is, ‘The plant collections are more important.’ We can replace >





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► grass, or it bounces back as soon as it starts to rain.”

Perhaps the biggest change required when considering the future of grassy lawns is our expectations. In Gotland, Sweden, a hosepipe ban preventing the irrigation of lawns was followed by “Gotland’s Ugliest Lawn” competition to “change the norm of green lawns”.

You might expect David Hedges-Gower, founder of the Lawn Association, to be a lawn ultra-loyalist, but he is critical of the ryegrass that dominates the modern turf industry. Ryegrass varieties have a thick leaf and look lush at first, but are actually shallow-rooted and susceptible to drought. “These rye grasses are the new trendy grass. It’s a crop grass that can be sold very cheaply in garden centres and is used by the football industry. It’s what we call a replacement grass, because you will need to replenish and replace it because it dies off. It’s not a very good grass,” he says.

Hedges-Gower argues that we must jettison ryegrass, but we don’t need to replace it with an exotic, drought-tolerant wonder species. “Everything we need is already here. Our native grasses, such as fescues, will thrive anywhere and are probably the most drought-tolerant native grass. Bent grasses tend to be found in older lawns and gardens, and prosper in acidic soils.”

And Hedges-Gower wants us to change our perception of lawn perfection. “When grasses go brown for a period of time we tend to think they are not healthy and look terrible. But they are not dead, they are dormant, and if that grass is capable of regrowing again we’ve got our drought-tolerant plant already,” he says. “We’ve got to change our mindsets. Sustainable lawn care is the easiest thing to do. Use the right grass species and if it is healthy and your soils are healthy, its recovery will be a lot quicker. Putting up with a brown lawn for 10 weeks might be the future.”

**It seems that ryegrass** is a malign influence in our farming system, too. When not drought-stricken, Britain’s grasslands may still look green and pleasant, but 98% of English and Welsh pasture has been stripped of life over the past century. As the experimental plots at Rothamsted revealed, heavily fertilised grassland quickly loses its botanical diversity, with fertilised plots rapidly changing from containing 50 different species of grass and herb to just two or three grasses.

Across the country, such “improved” grasslands have delivered more grass for livestock, but much less for nature. Flower-rich hay meadows have also been ploughed up and re-sown with juicy, fast-growing ryegrasses. Barely 2% of traditional “semi-natural” hay meadows, whose wildflowers support a vast array of insect and bird life, survive today.

“We have this bias towards really productive, sugary ryegrass varieties when some of our native grasses will do just as good a job,” says Dr Lisa Norton, an agro-ecologist for the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. Norton does not want to demonise ryegrass – “It’s not the baddie,” she says – but she argues that we need a mix of other grass species in farmed grassland, too.

## KEEP OFF THE GRASS

### Green and pleasant

*For Séamas O’Reilly, lawn care is all about doing less than before*

‘Nothing is more pleasant to the eye than green grass kept finely shorn,’ wrote Francis Bacon. By that, I mean the 17th-century statesman and not the 20th-century artist, who presumably felt the same way about paintings of lads in chairs having panic attacks. The British fascination with lawncare is older than we might presume, but it was doubtless raised to a high science by Capability Brown, the 18th-century landscape architect whose ‘pleasure gardens’ for the great and good of English society turned a passion into a fervour. He is generally regarded as the reason why, 250 years later, every episode of *Antiques Roadshow* looks as if it’s been filmed on a golf course with a mansion attached, and why every owner of a deckchair-sized plot of

Britain feels a patriotic duty to keep it fashioned with a military haircut.

After 11 years in London, my wife and I are finally renting somewhere with a garden, which means I am lawn-adjacent for the first time in my adult life, and resentful of the responsibilities this entails.

Growing up, I was distressingly familiar with the stuff. I was born and raised in a big bungalow my dad bought largely due to the acre-and-a-half plot of land in which it sat. I spent many thousands of hours cutting and raking it. Little did we know that such care was not merely injurious to my personal development, but to the planet as well. The good news is that the foremost pleasure of rewilding is the fact that, for once, the morally correct thing to do might be ‘less than you were doing before’. Granted, we moved here in February and I’ve only cut it twice but I’m delighted to inform visitors that this idleness was, serendipitously, the morally correct choice; it is the regrowth of grass and insect species, the encouragement of biodiversity, a direct attack on the energy industry.

During this summer’s drought in the southeast of England, some farmers with more diverse swards have managed to remain greener a lot longer than farmers growing shallow-rooted ryegrass. Different native grasses, herbs and legumes have deeper roots, adding organic material to the soil and making passages for water to be drawn down into the soil. This makes more naturalistic, diverse grassland better at retaining water in times of floods (another useful attribute) and a superior store of carbon. Ryegrass mixes also tend to be ploughed up and re-sown every five to 10 years to maximise their productivity, and ploughing releases carbon stored in the soil.

In a climate crisis, we may want more from our farmed grasslands than simply to produce the most grass we can for intensively farmed dairy cattle and other livestock. There’s a “substantial minority” of farmers who are investigating alternatives to ryegrass monocultures, says Norton, who works with farmers in northwest England. “They recognise we need something a bit more resilient and are thinking about long-term sustainable production.”

**At Rothamsted**, 166 years after the grass-cutting experiment began, scientists continue to seek smarter ways to use grass. “We are very familiar with grasses, and there is a very tight bond between humans and grasses and grasslands,” says Gonzalo Irisarri, an agronomist studying the impact of the North Atlantic Oscillation weather system on hay production. “Three species of grasses provide us with 50% of the calories we consume worldwide – wheat, corn [maize] and rice.”

Such a dependency, Irisarri says, is not wise. So one research priority is to identify a more diverse range of crops and study how farmers can grow more legumes (such as peas) that provide food but also capture and deliver nitrogen to the soil, reducing the use of synthetic fertilisers. New crops, alternatives to grasses, and creative ways of managing the land are needed. Irisarri cites his home country, Argentina, whose soybean production was boosted when many farmers adopted “no till” techniques – not ploughing the soil so that moisture is retained as well as being beneficial to soil microbial life. “Non-tillage systems is something that we learned really fast in Argentina,” he says. “We can retain the moisture, and that’s something that farmers will need to be keen on in the UK in the future.”

Grasslands that we use for leisure in cities and for food in the countryside will change in an era of rapid global heating. No grassland can be lush green all year round, brim with biodiversity and provide rich food for livestock. Norton says there will be trade-offs between different requirements and, ultimately, society’s decisions over what it eats and drinks will shape our grasslands.

“We need transformational change in our grasslands so they are suited to the future environment, climate and needs of society – in filtering water, for instance, and providing higher biodiversity,” she says. “For me the hope is that these new grasslands can be productive and resilient – that’s what we really want.” ■



**There's nothing Olivia Cooke likes better than a chat in her local café. But a leading part in the new Game of Thrones prequel means life is about to change dramatically for the modest Mancunian – and her mum who is determined to set her up with a Hollywood A-lister**

*Interview* **ELLE HUNT**  
*Photographs* **SIMON EMMETT**  
*Fashion editor* **JO JONES**

**‘I had to grow  
up so quickly’**







'I'm always trying to escape the last thing I've done':  
Olivia Cooke wears blue leather dress and rollneck by [acnestudios.com](http://acnestudios.com). Facing page: red leather jacket, trousers and gloves by [bottegaveneta.com](http://bottegaveneta.com); heels by [christianlouboutin.com](http://christianlouboutin.com)



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If you happen to be worried about getting older, Olivia Cooke is an excellent friend to have. She's repeating the pep talk that she recently gave to a friend who was "panicking" about ageing another year: "32 is the new 22 – it really is," she declares over a mid-afternoon pot of English breakfast tea. And, at 31 myself, I'm glad to let her finish the thought. "You wouldn't pay to go back to 22," she continues, with feeling. "Well, I wouldn't."

Cooke herself is nearly three months away from turning 29. But more than racing towards milestones she says she and her friends are regressing. She's just got back from a holiday in Sicily. Before that, Edinburgh for the Fringe festival. Before that, the desert. ("A few days to dry out," she captioned the party pictures on Instagram. "Lol kidding.") She seems reassured when I tell her my summer has been much the same. "We're going out more, we're drinking more," she says. "It's escapism, isn't it? With everything going on in the world, the future feels so uncertain."

Quarter-life crises are the lot of our millennial generation, but Cooke in particular could be on the cusp of major change. When we meet, she is just weeks out from the biggest and brightest spotlight of her career: a meaty part in *Game of Thrones* prequel *House of the Dragon*, one of the most hotly anticipated television series in history.

From episode six on, Cooke plays Alicent Hightower, the daughter of King Viserys I Targaryen's righthand man and a keen political operator in her own right. Cooke landed the role in October 2020, after an exhaustive and highly secretive audition process over Zoom. Until then, she'd not even seen *Game of Thrones*, which she chalks up to a contrarian streak. "I resist things that are popular," she says, "but to my own detriment, because it's really fucking good."

I've caught Cooke in the halcyon period ("luscious", she calls it, her Mancunian vowels no less round for her years in North America) between finishing press and before the scrutiny turns on her.

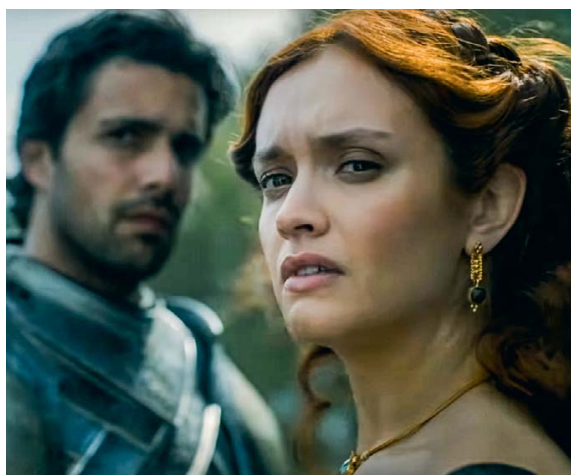
During 10 years as an actor, Cooke has built a career of remarkable diversity and consistent quality, showing herself to be as capable in Spielberg-scale theatre-fillers (*Ready Player One*) as Sundance sleepers (*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*). Often she'll move from one genre to another – horror in *The Quiet Ones*, comedy in *Thoroughbreds* – and between big and small screens. She has the endurance for five seasons of *Bates Motel*, and the shine to carry a miniseries like ITV's *Vanity Fair*. *Sound of Metal*, in which she starred alongside Oscar-nominated Riz Ahmed, showed off her powers of transformation, her performance as a wounded, intense metal singer singled out for praise.

Cooke learned to play guitar and metal-scream for that role – evidence, she says, that she's "a bit of a masochist". She goes on: "I feel like I'm always trying to escape the last thing I've done, and go for its antithesis. I get bored quite easily, and bored of myself... It's just me trying to learn and be curious, but also pique my interest as much as anyone else's."

The upshot of this desire to subvert expectations is that Cooke's career has not yet coalesced into celebrity. When *House of the Dragon* came her way in early 2020, Cooke had just settled into what she describes as a "sweet spot." She'd returned to London after many years living in New York, fallen back in with her old friends, largely shaken off the anxieties and insecurities that had plagued her since her early 20s. The pause enforced by the pandemic was "a tonic", she admits. "Being in London, I just felt like I'd come home."

The *Game of Thrones* behemoth threatens to disturb this new-found peace, in being the focal point of "so many opinions", says Cooke, humorously rolling her eyes. "When I was auditioning, I was definitely like: 'I don't know if this is what I want for my life.' But then I got to see the first two scripts, and it was good."

**'I hate what I become on the red carpet – so amped up and shouty'**



Alicent is an unabashed agent of the patriarchy, "an incubator who's been indoctrinated to be fine with it, and to know her place within the court," Cooke says. "But that's not to say that she's not got agency, or power and intelligence – it's just a really interesting amalgamation."

But the clincher was that Cooke would be able to stay put in London – *House of the Dragon* was shot on Warner Brothers' brand-new digital production stage in Watford. "It felt really alluring, just being in one place for a year."

When, after three months, she learned that she'd landed the part, she says: "It felt amazing. But then also, obviously – oh my God." Her brown eyes, already big, widen. "Is my life about to change in a really scary way? And: what have I done?"

*House of the Dragon* is set to be Cooke's biggest-ever audience. The first episode reached more than 4m people, more than the 2011 premiere of *Game of Thrones*. It could make Cooke a star, I suggest. "Yeah, as I become a huge, massive celeb," she scoffs. "As I become Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson..." She pauses. "I've worked for a decade and I've done what I thought – or what everyone told me – would be the

thing, and still managed to live very anonymously."

At least for now, Cooke escapes attention at places like this east London café not far from her home, where we've met on a muggy Friday afternoon. She is friendly and familiar, greeting me with a hug and full of apology for being a few minutes late and "slightly sweaty". In fact she strikes me as effortlessly put together, wearing a loose vintage-looking shirt with jeans, drop pearl earrings and red patent boots: every bit the London cool girl.

Her manner, though, seems essentially of the North:

**'I just feel so solid in who I am... Weirdly, the older I get, the younger I feel': (from top) with Tom Bateman in *Vanity Fair*; and in *House of the Dragon***

quick to laugh, self-effacing, with a strong caretaking instinct that shows itself when I ask that we move to a quieter table (and again when I confess to having had three coffees: "Oh,

really? Do you want something to eat? No? You're OK?") Often, over the course of our 90 minutes, I have to steer Cooke off the subject of me and back on to her. "I love asking questions and finding out about people," she says. "I could natter and natter for hours."

It's the focus on her that Cooke struggles with, even claiming to dissociate on red carpets. "I find it really zapping of my energy," she says, apologetically. "I just hate the person I become on these things – so amped up with adrenaline, and so shouty. But then I also feel like I'm being so annoyingly self-deprecating, because I don't want them to think like I'm full of myself... I feel like I'm just too aware of what's going on and also trying to distance myself at it at the same time."

**In fact, she insists**, her life has changed less than you might think of the journey from Manchester to Westeros. Cooke grew up in Oldham, Greater Manchester, the eldest daughter of a sales rep and a retired police officer. Her parents split when she was six years old and her sister Eleanor was six months, after which they lived with their mother. Her parents didn't understand her early ambition to act, she says, but they were supportive. Now Cooke's mum in particular gets a kick out of her daughter, the Hollywood actor. Cooke describes fondly the corkboard tallying her achievements and the helpful suggestions of A-listers she might like to date. "Just anyone who came up on the TV that she found remotely attractive: 'What about 'im?'"

From the age of eight, Cooke attended the Oldham Theatre Workshop, a local drama programme with a proven record of nurturing talent, where she met many of the actors who form her close-knit London crew today. One, Sam Glen (ex-*Coronation Street*), helped her land an agent when she was 14. Not long afterwards – Cooke grimaces to remember – they were going out clubbing in Manchester, getting into 42's and The Gay Village with fake IDs and "just causing havoc".

What kind of havoc, I ask. Cooke is a bit shamefaced. "Drinking in the street, the park, the occasional police chase..."

When, at 18, she was offered a part in the 2012 BBC miniseries *Blackout*, alongside Christopher Eccleston, she dropped out of school before finishing her A-levels. "My mum was a bit worried... but I knew what I wanted, even then." *Bates Motel* seemed to signal the big time, calling Cooke to Canada for five seasons from 2013 to 2017. She credits Oscar-nominated Vera Farmiga with impressing on her the value of preparation to allow for presence of mind on set. "She had the role in her bones," Cooke says, with awe.

Still now, Cooke puts the hours into understanding her characters' motivations, mastering their accents, liaising with wardrobe. (It was her idea to bleach her character's eyebrows in *Sound of Metal*.) "Just to do all the work before is so freeing," she says. But it also betrays a baseline anxiety about wanting to do good work – and some aspects of the industry, Cooke found she couldn't prepare for.

"I'm so grateful for that job, but I had a really tough time on it," she says. "The way the schedule worked, we all had different storylines, so a lot of my time was spent in this apartment in Vancouver, working once every two weeks." It was as grim as it sounds, says Cooke; and, being below the legal drinking age, she struggled to meet people.

She had always been inclined to melancholy: one of her earliest memories was being struck by another child's claim to be feeling 100%. "I literally thought, as an eight-year-old: I don't think I've ever been 100%." Isolated and far from home, with the stakes for her career feeling sky-high, Cooke became depressed. "It was a big old lovely cocktail: being homesick and not knowing it, having not stopped since I was 18, being on my own for large swathes of time."

Her response was to throw herself further into her >



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**'I've always been quite protective of myself':  
Olivia Cooke wears  
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► work. In 2016, when she was 22, Cooke had what she terms a “full mental breakdown”. She winces at the recollection. “It was bad, bad. Awful, actually.” I express surprise – there’s no break in her filmography. “Oh, no, I was working all the way through,” she says, with a rueful laugh. “I was very good at hiding it.”

At the time, Cooke was shooting *Ready Player One* and also *Thoroughbreds*, welcome distractions from her own unhappiness (especially the latter, she jokes drily: she plays a sociopath with no emotions). “If anything, I was like, let me escape myself.”

She has never struggled to advocate for herself on set. “I’ve always been quite protective of myself and known my limits,” she says, “and known if someone was taking the piss. And no one else is going to say it, usually.” For other people, I point out, that would be a reason to keep schtum. “If it happens more than twice, then I speak up,” she says.

But if work was Cooke’s refuge it was no match for the outside world. As an outspoken leftist and feminist, she felt keenly the double shock of Brexit and Trump.

Cooke was living in New York at the time, having moved to be with then-boyfriend Christopher Abbott (Charlie from *Girls*), and remembers going to a protest outside Trump’s hotel. “So stupid,” she says, shaking her head, half-amused, half-vexed by her naivety. “I was like: ‘Wow, my rights aren’t a given, it’s 2016, and I’m still not seen as an equal... and I’m a white woman, so I’m still leaps and bounds ahead of others.’ It was just so, so bleak.”

Six years later, Cooke notes grimly, some of the horrors inflicted on women in *House of the Dragon* are far from fantastical in the US. “Children having children: I didn’t

realise how topical it would become, with Roe v Wade.”

It’s hard to separate our generation’s mental health from our experience of politics, I suggest. “You still have to care,” Cooke says. “But there’s a strange numbness that comes with each political blow.”

Cooke’s mental health got better with time – but it wasn’t until 2019 that she started to have consecutive days free from “the incessant, persistent, anxious thoughts”. Meanwhile, New York’s appeal started to fade. She missed British TV (*The Vicar of Dibley* is her comfort viewing), black humour and being around people who understood she wasn’t “Scottish, or neighbours with the Queen”.

When she and Abbott broke up just before the pandemic, it was “another reason to come home”, she says. “What was really healing was moving back to London.”

Many people are feeling bleak about broken Britain at the moment, I say. “Well, I think because I left America I was like: ‘This is glorious!’” Cooke points out, laughing.

Now the energy crisis and the cost of living has taken the sheen off life in the UK, she agrees. “I’m having conversations with my sister and my mum, and of course I will always help them out – but, yes, it is just fucking bleak. It’s awful.”

At the same time, Cooke’s past experience has taught her to seek out happiness, and even peace, wherever she can. More than the bandage-dresses and “paralytic” drinking of her early 20s, she says, she regrets taking herself so seriously. “I just had to grow up so quickly: I was the only person taking care of me.” She sighs. “Now I wish that I could go back and just be like: God, relax.” Hence the regression this summer. “I feel like I’m reliving my early

20s.” Except this time, she adds, “I just feel so solid in who I am... Weirdly, the older I get, the younger I feel.”

Now Cooke has boundaries around work, and other ambitions. She would like to live in Europe, perhaps Amsterdam, “to broaden my horizons a little bit” – but her alternative path takes me by surprise. “More and more, I think I’ve wanted to have a family,” Cooke says slowly, as though only now admitting it to herself. “But that’s literally just been in the last couple of months... Just seeing how my sister is with her little boy, who is amazing, but also a savage – how she’s grown, and that love that she has.”

I mention 25-year-old *Euphoria* actor Sydney Sweeney’s recent comment that she couldn’t afford to take time off to become a mother. “Oh, economically, I’ve never thought about it,” she says, self-mockingly. “I’m just like: ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to have someone who loves you?’ Right now, family is the goal, but I’m so contrary.”

She declines to say whether she’s currently in a relationship now (“because I’ve done that before, and then it breaks up”), but does admit to sliding into celebrities’ Instagram DMs during lockdown in 2020 – and getting no replies. I’m outraged on her behalf – then press for names.

“Absolutely not,” says Cooke, instantly. “Bless you for asking. If I was drunk, I would tell you. It’s embarrassing, pathetic really, that I thought I had a chance.”

But for the moment, Cooke says, she loves her life as it is: “I’m quite content, for the first time in years.”

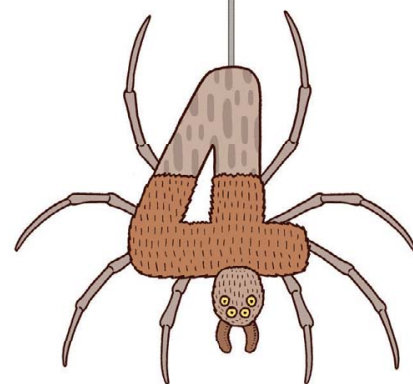
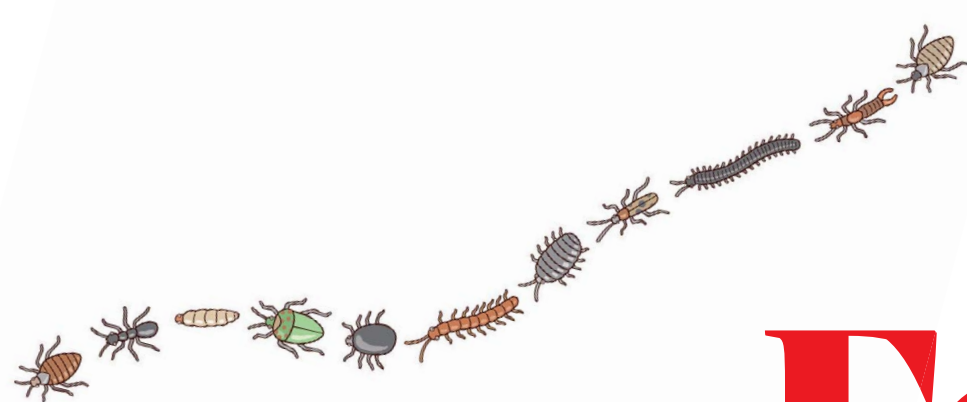
It would be a shame if something were to change it dramatically, I say, meaningfully. Cooke groans. “I mean, who knows? You can’t really predict. But my life is really normal, and I just can’t see that changing.”

The café is closing around us and Cooke has a train to catch to Cardiff, for another no doubt boozy weekend with friends. She walks me to the pedestrian crossing, gives me another hug, then disappears down a side street – striding in her red boots, confident there’s no place like home. ■

*House of the Dragon* is on Mondays on Sky Atlantic and NOW

## Her mother points out A-listers she might like to date: ‘What about ‘im?’





# Fear and loathing

**We can develop phobias about anything and everything. But their grip on our imaginations also reveals much about the strangeness of life. Kate Summerscale explores 10 top terrors**

Illustrations **PHIL HACKETT**

**W**e are all driven by our fears and desires, and sometimes we are in thrall to them. The American physician Benjamin Rush kicked off the craze for naming such fixations in 1786. Until then, the word “phobia” (which is derived from Phobos, the Greek god of panic and terror) had been applied only to symptoms of physical disease, but Rush used it to describe psychological phenomena. “I shall define phobia to be a fear of an imaginary evil,” he wrote, “or an undue fear of a real one.” He listed 18 phobias, among them terrors of dirt, ghosts, doctors and rats.

Over the next century, psychiatrists developed a more complex understanding of these traits. They came to see phobias as lurid traces of our evolutionary and personal histories, manifestations both of animal instincts and of desires that we had repressed. They identified dozens of irrational fears, among them fears of public spaces, small spaces, blushing and being buried alive (agoraphobia, claustrophobia, erythrophobia, taphephobia).

To be diagnosed as a specific phobia, a fear must be excessive, unreasonable, and have lasted for six months or more; and it must interfere with normal life. Though these fixations are more responsive to treatment than other

anxious disorders, most people don’t report them, choosing instead to avoid the objects that they fear. This makes it difficult to measure their prevalence, but recent studies suggest that one woman in 10 experiences a specific phobia, and one man in 20. Many more of us have milder aversions that we sometimes refer to as phobias: a strong dislike of public speaking or of visiting the dentist, of the sound of thunder or the sight of spiders.

When I began researching the subject, I did not think of myself as having any particular phobias – apart, perhaps, from my teenage dread of blushing and an enduring anxiety about flying – but by the time I’d finished I had talked myself into almost every one. Some terrors are no sooner imagined than felt.

The causes of these conditions are disputed. We can become phobic after a shock, or just by witnessing the fear of others. Freud proposed that a phobia was a suppressed dread or desire displaced on to an external object. “Phobia particularises anxiety,” observes the literary scholar David Trotter, “to the point at which it can be felt and known *in its particularity*, and thus counteracted or got around.” Evolutionary psychologists argue that many phobias are adaptive: our fears of heights and snakes are hardwired

in our brains to prevent us from falling from heights or being bitten by snakes; our disgust at rats protects us from disease. Evolution may help explain why women are disproportionately phobic, especially in the years in which they can bear children: their heightened caution protects their offspring as well as themselves. But phobias may also seem more common in women because the social environment is more hostile to them, or because their fears are more often dismissed as irrational.

All phobias are cultural creations: the moment at which each one was identified – or invented – marked a change in how we thought about ourselves. When we decide that a particular behaviour is irrational, we mark out our boundaries, indicating the beliefs on which our society is constructed. These borders shift over time, and in a moment of collective crisis – a war, a pandemic – they can change fast.

Phobias may be oppressive, but they also enchant the world around us, making it as scary and vivid as a fairytale. They endow objects or actions with mysterious meaning and give them the power to possess and transform us. They exert a physical hold, like magic, and in doing so reveal our own strangeness.





## Clowns

A fear of clowns, known as coulrophobia, became prevalent in the US in the 1980s, after newspapers published pictures of the serial killer John Wayne Gacy dressed in a clown suit. The fear became a kind of collective hysteria, with “stalker clowns” spotted in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Kansas City, Omaha, Nebraska and Colorado, and it spread even further in 1986 with the publication of Stephen King’s *It*. The supernatural jester in King’s bestselling novel is a malevolent being who takes on the shape of whatever a child most fears. His fixed grin hides a soul full of horrors.

## Tiny insects

Acarophobia is an extreme fear of tiny insects (*akari* in Greek), which can develop into a belief that minuscule creatures have invaded the body. Some acarophobes gouge out their own flesh in attempts to dislodge imagined insects. “I found him stripped to the waist,” wrote Luis Buñuel after visiting Salvador Dalí in a Parisian hotel in the 1920s, “an enormous bandage on his back. Apparently he thought he’d felt a ‘flea’ or some other strange beast and had attacked his back with a razor blade. Bleeding profusely, he got the hotel manager to call a doctor, only to discover that the ‘flea’ was in reality a pimple.”

## Kayaks

At the turn of the 20th century, many Inuit men in Greenland abandoned the kayaks in which they hunted seals, having become paralysed with fear out at sea. In some coastal districts, more than one in 10 of the adult males had “kayak phobia”, a serious problem in a colony that, since the decline of whaling, had become dependent on seal hunting.

Some have speculated that the phenomenon was a form of agoraphobia, while others argue that it stemmed from sensory deprivation, a loss of orientation provoked by the still, featureless landscape of the North Atlantic. But the Inuit had their own explanation. According to folklore, the terror was caused by a *tupilak*, a monster sent to kill a hunter by a jealous rival. Doctors interpreted kayak phobia as an individual pathology, but Greenlanders thought it emanated from social tensions. For them, the trouble expressed by a phobia was not personal but communal.

## Frogs

Some of us are horrified by a frog’s gleaming eyes and skin, the pulsing sac at its throat; its webbed feet, perfect stillness and sudden, vaulting leap. The aversion is known as batrachophobia, after the Greek *batrachos* (frog). In the early 1980s, a young woman in Michigan was mowing the riverbank near her house when she suddenly saw bloody chunks of frog spewing from the machine. She afterwards had nightmares about frogs; she hated to hear them croaking by the river; she



fled if she found one in her house. Her visceral horror at the pulped amphibian flesh seemed to have coalesced with a guilty dread that the creatures might seek revenge.

## The number four

Tetraphobia, or a fear of the number four (*tessares* in Ancient Greek), is common in East Asian countries, because in several languages (among them Mandarin, Korean and Japanese) the sound of the word “four” is very similar to the sound of the word “death”. Many buildings in East Asia skip all floor and room numbers that include four – 4, 14, 24 and so on – and some Hong Kong hotels jump from floor 39 to floor 50. In Taiwan, South Korea and China the numbers of ships and aircraft rarely end in a four.

A study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2001 showed that Asian-Americans were 13% more likely to die of heart failure on the fourth day of the month than on any other day. The finding seemed to confirm that fear could be fatal.

## Clusters of holes

An aversion to clusters of holes or bumps was identified as a phobia in 2003, when

an image of a seemingly maggot-infested female breast was circulated on the internet. Those who reacted most strongly learned they shared a horror of such patterns. Some created online discussion groups, and in 2005 one participant invented the word tryphobia (from the Greek *trupē*, or hole) to describe the trait.

The original internet meme turned out to be a composite of a lotus-seed pod and a woman’s breast, but this made it no less repulsive to true tryphobes. The phobia can be provoked by any conglomeration of rough circular shapes: in sponges, barnacles, crumpets, soap suds, honeycombs, the pitted back of a Surinam toad. Some scientists believe irregular bumps and holes may trigger the disgust reflex, which evolved to protect us from pathogens, because they are reminiscent of rashes, sores, cysts or the pustules of infectious disease.

## Beards

In 2013, Jeremy Paxman accused the BBC of pogonophobia – a satirical term coined in the 19th century to describe a hatred of beards – after he appeared on *Newsnight* unshaven. He claimed the corporation was as averse to facial hair as the dictator Enver Hoxha, who banned beards in Albania in 1967. Early cave paintings indicate that even our Neanderthal ancestors removed their beards, perhaps to get rid of parasites, using clamshells as tweezers or flints as razors.

Roald Dahl loathed beards, denouncing them as “hairy smoke-screens behind which to hide”. In Dahl’s *The Twits* (1980), Mr Twit has a huge beard matted with old cornflakes and scraps of Stilton and sardines. “By sticking out his tongue and curling it sideways

to explore the hairy jungle around his mouth,” observes Dahl, disgustedly, “he was always able to find a tasty morsel here and there to nibble on.”

## Trains

In 1879, the physician Johannes Rigler gave the name “siderodromophobia” to a new illness suffered by railway workers. The word was a translation of the German *eisenbahnangst*, or “iron-road-angst”, into the Greek *sideros* (iron) and *dromos* (track) and *phobia* (fear). According to Rigler, the violent jolts of train travel could bring on physical and mental breakdown.

Freud thought his railway phobia began on a train trip from Leipzig to Vienna when he was two. He speculated that he had seen his mother naked on this journey, and had developed the phobia by displacing on to the train both his excitement – “my libido was stirred up towards matrem” – and his fear that his father would punish him for his desire.

Freud later argued that boys were aroused by the pounding, juddering motion of railway travel. Those who repressed the fantasies associated with these sensations might, like him, acquire a phobia of trains. Instead of inducing excitement, the tremble of the locomotive would bring on nausea, anxiety and dread.

## Telephone calls

Doctors at a Parisian hospital made the first diagnosis of *téléphonophobie* in 1913.

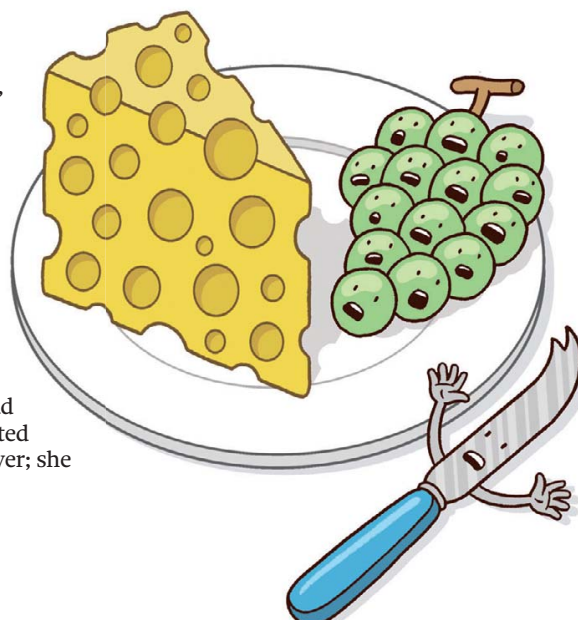
Their patient was seized by anguished terror when she heard a phone ring, and upon answering a call she froze and became almost incapable of speech. In these early days, the telephone could seem a sinister, intrusive device. In some respects, the situation has been reversed. Many of us are afraid of being separated from our phones, an anxiety jokingly dubbed “nomophobia” in 2008.

But now that we use mobile phones in so many different ways, phone calls themselves have become scary again. In a survey of 2019, 76% of respondents born in the past two decades of the 20th century said that they felt anxious when they heard the phone ring.

## Sleep

Hypnophobia – from the Greek *hypnos*, sleep – is a morbid fear of sleep, usually caused by a terror of dreams or nightmares. The condition was identified in a medical dictionary in 1855, and vividly dramatised in Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* in 1984. In this film, teenagers are visited at night by a disfigured and insane child murderer who has the power to kill them as they dream. “Whatever you do,” ran the tagline, “don’t fall asleep.” ■

*The Book of Phobias and Manias* by Kate Summerscale is published by Wellcome/Profile, £16.99. Buy it for £14.78 at [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com)





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**Women are always being told to control their emotions. But when it comes to feeling calmer, happier and less anxious, nothing beats a good scream. Behavioural scientist Pragma Agarwal lets it all out**

# At full volume



**O**ne afternoon in early lockdown I led my two small children into the garden and told them to scream. “Go on,” I said, setting a timer. “Scream as loud as you want. I’ll join you.” We’d been in the house, socially distanced for more than a month by then. The children’s routine had been completely disrupted and they were confused and restless; my husband and I were managing full-time jobs along with full-time childcare. I was juggling grief, trauma, housework, childcare, writing. I was tired of keeping all the stress bubbling inside and weary of telling the children to stop being noisy. I was also conscious of how, even in the most gender-equitable households, parents are more likely to ask girls to be quiet than boys. What if we released it all at once? What if we just let it all out?

The children looked at each other, confused, wondering

whether I was being sarcastic. But then they started. It came less easily for me. After decades of telling myself that screaming was unseemly, I could only really do a feeble imitation of someone letting out a scream. I felt tongue-tied, too conscious of how I looked or what I sounded like, what the neighbours might think of me. “Are you all OK?” one asked with a nervous laugh from over the fence.

Within a day or two of garden screaming it felt like a valve had burst and all the frustrations and stress came whooshing out with an unexpected force. We were soon running around the garden with our arms flailing until we collapsed in a heap together on the ground laughing, our legs entwined. Slowly we found that the children were also calmer and less likely to erupt into meltdowns and tantrums. There was a distinct feeling of elation that lasted through the rest of the day. For me, at least.

I am a behavioural scientist, and the more I researched the psychological effects of structured yelling, the more I realised that this discharge of emotions triggers a neuro-physical response, a release of pent-up anger in a conscious way, rather than letting it erupt in a disordered manner. Yelling in this manner can release endorphins, happy hormones, much like a high we get after exercising. These endorphins, along with the peptides produced by the pituitary gland, can together have an emboldening effect by triggering the brain’s receptors to reduce pain and increase strength. I could feel my muscles relaxing and becoming more alert to the sounds and smells around me.

Primal scream therapy became very popular in the 70s with people like John Lennon and Yoko Ono espousing it, but I didn’t see our screaming sessions in the same way. Rather than ruminating on our stress and anger, >





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► I was allowing us to fly off the handle for a short while, reclaiming our anger, sadness and frustration and all the associated emotions that have been considered bad for us as women. The first step towards this was the acknowledgement and acceptance that these are all valid emotions requiring an outlet, not to be dismissed or hidden or shoved back inside.

**'If my anger wasn't part of me, then it was easy to consider it as an alien beast and lock it away like a deep, dark secret': Pragya Agarwal with her daughters**

**Screaming is considered** to have huge benefits in Chinese medicine. Twelve years ago, visiting China, I'd seen men and women gathering every morning in the gardens around the city to scream together. One of my distinct memories of Xian is the reverberation of screams around the neighbourhood we were staying in. According to Qigong Grandmaster Nan Lu (who has several videos on YouTube), the energy that feeds the liver's wellbeing needs to flow, but it can get obstructed by frustration. His remedy is to shake like a noisy tree. To do this, stand tall, then swoop your body down toward the floor and come up swinging like a tree in the wind. The idea of standing tall seems very empowering to me, especially as girls are told to shrink themselves from a young age. Shaking the whole body, reach your fingertips to the sky, and, gathering all your frustration, release it with a loud scream.

Growing up, every Bollywood film I watched reinforced the stereotype of the "damsel in distress", with an elegant melancholy seen as a desirable quality in every leading lady, while expressions of strong emotions were always associated with a harridan, vixen or shrew. The goddess Kali is interpreted as a symbol of death, her face contorted into an ugly scream, and is used to remind women that expression of emotions, such as anger, can be all-consuming and destructive.

When angry women appear in literature, they are likely to be monsters, harpies or witches. The word banshee has been used for hundreds of years for a screaming, wailing woman, someone who shows an excess of emotion. In Irish folklore, banshees were magical, mythical women in the form of spirits who fed on other people's sadness and flew all night long looking for prey. Their eyes red with continual weeping, their hair streaming around their face, looking terrifying, they heralded the death of a family member, usually by screaming.

Women's screaming has long been considered unfeminine, creating discomfort for people around them. Women are given the message that screaming is "ugly" and that no one will listen to them if they show their emotions. In her book *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Rebecca Traister writes: "The best way to discredit these women, to make them look unattractive, is to capture an image of them screaming. The act of a woman opening her mouth with volume and assured force, often in complaint, is coded in our minds as ugly."

The idea was planted long ago. In 1615, Helkiah Crooke, court physician to King James I of England, wrote an extensive work explaining that to maintain the order of all nature, a man had to be hotter to bear the weight of work and decisions, and his mind had to be stout to withstand dangers. Men's bodies could withstand their temper, while women could not bear the heat associated with the expression of strong emotions. They – we – are supposedly too fragile.

Emotional expression is also linked to an assessment of competence at work, but research has shown that this effect is very gendered. A 2015 study showed that expression of emotions such as screaming led to more influence for men in power, while for women their influence decreased.

## 'Women's screaming has for years been considered unfeminine'

Instead, women are expected to express their anger and frustrations – agentic emotions afforded primarily to men – in the form of sadness and melancholy.

Women internalise these ideas, they suppress and moderate their emotional outbursts. But inevitably the dissociation creates anguish, and rumination and suppression of anger and other such negative emotions is one of the major contributors to anxiety in women. Women's happiness has been declining for the past 30 years, both absolutely and relative to men, in much of the western world, but especially in the USA and the UK. Women are also likely to experience more depression compared with men.

Over the years, I too tried to dissociate my "negative" emotions from myself. It seemed easier. If my anger wasn't part of me, then it was easy to consider it as an alien beast and lock it up away like a deep, dark secret. But this rumination triggered sadness, and rather than helping me, any expression of strong emotions only added to the stress, evoking guilt and shame for flying off the handle. However, over the past couple of years, I found that I couldn't keep my emotions bottled up any more. Maybe it is growing older and not caring as much what people think of me, or the exhaustion and trauma of the pandemic, or maybe it was perimenopause. This monster inside me wasn't ready to be kept on a leash any more.

I started to wonder if allowing myself to fly off the handle now and then would help alleviate some of this anxiety that I was feeling. Could screaming be the answer?

One day, scrolling through YouTube, I came across artist Pipilotti Rist's *Ever Is Over All* from 1997, which is a large-scale projection installation showing a woman happily walking down a street. Accompanied by a dreamy, ethereal soundtrack and with a large grin on her face, she smashes the windows of cars using a metal flower while a female police officer salutes her as she walks by. The action seems to provide a cathartic release from the suffocating feminine image we are often shown by the male gaze, a joyful requiem to the traditional societal norms and codes of feminine good behaviour. It reminded me of Beyoncé's music video for *Hold Up*, released in 2016, where she

walks down the road smashing the windows of cars, smiling and unapologetic – expression of strong emotions is not always a negative thing, it says, especially in women, but can be positive, empowering and freeing us from systemic inequalities.

When I first heard of rage rooms, the idea of going and smashing a few objects for an hour or two sounded very appealing. But in the meantime, I play *I Will Survive* on the car stereo and scream loudly into the ether while I drive. It is empowering and cathartic especially after I have been called "too much" or "too angry" once again on social media for my work addressing gender and racial inequalities.

Labels are easy to assign: hot-headed, tempestuous, emotional, hysterical. But isn't it time we all break out of these oppressive norms that we have imposed on ourselves for so long, believing that screaming is unfeminine? I have long admired the Maori tradition of the haka, where women use their whole body and a range of facial expressions, dancing, stamping, chanting and screaming to express themselves and intimidate the opposition.

In having these screaming sessions with my children, I claimed my anger and frustration and sadness and the whole range of human emotions as my own. I have learned to use my anger for action and acknowledge that anger is an appropriate reaction to injustice, to stresses and anxieties, to ignorance and oppression. I keep these words by Audre Lorde close to my heart: "Guilt is not a response to anger. It is a response to one's own actions or lack of action." And I want to raise my girls to do the same. I no longer feel guilt for my emotions and its expressions. After all, feeling and showing emotions is what makes us human.

Last week we went to the woods. In a clearing, we raised our arms to the sky, standing tall with our feet wide apart, grounded and rooted but allowing our frustrations to be released through our fingertips, shaking our bodies with a loud whooping scream. Our dog proceeded to bark in harmony with us. A couple of passing strangers stopped, confused, and then joined in. The loud joyous cacophony of screams and barks and laughter reminded us how good it was to own our emotions and to release them without guilt and shame. My family walked home hand-in-hand feeling happier and lighter. And I felt like myself for the first time in a very long time. ■

*Hysterical: Exploding the Myth of Gendered Emotions* by Pragya Agarwal is published by Canongate at £16.99. Buy it for £14.44 from [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com)





# Food & drink

## Nigel Slater

🐦 @NigelSlater



## Welcome in the autumn with aubergines and baked bananas

Photographs JONATHAN LOVEKIN

There has been a slight change of step in the kitchen. The jars of beans have come down from the top shelf to bake with aubergines and onions; the oven is on again (albeit less often than last autumn) and what I cook is as much about warming up a chilly evening as about the love of cooking. There has been a show of hot puddings, too: crumbles and crisps made with autumn fruit; a proper apple pie with a shortcrust pastry crust glistening with sugar and the first bread and butter pudding of the season.

If I was only allowed one season in the kitchen it would be this. Every meal still has fruit and vegetables at its heart, but there is a substantiality to the suppers that is missing in the summer.

We are a long way from lentil pies and treacle-smeared steamed puddings, but also from the “substantial salads” that have occupied my time for the past few months. Deep autumn – the mounds of dried leaves, the occasional rain sodden day, the smell of bonfires in the gardens – brings with it a hankering for a few more carbs, be it beans, rice or bread.

I baked aubergines this week. A long, slow bake, the flesh rich with olive oil and as soft as a silk scarf. To the baking dish came some fat and floury beans, thyme and masses of sweet onions. As the oven was on, I baked a pudding, too, a version of bread and butter pudding made with brioche and bananas. Light and quivering custard holding crumbled

sweet bread and – all too rare in my kitchen – baked bananas. And I know it sounds like too much of a good thing, but the pudding is wonderful with a little cream, poured over at the table.

### Baked aubergine with white beans and thyme

I prefer the bottled variety beans for this recipe – they are more expensive than dried, but you save the cost of cooking them – but you could use canned beans if you prefer. Including the canning or bottling liquid juices is essential. *Serves 3*

**aubergines** 3, medium  
**olive oil** 125ml  
**onions** 3, medium  
**garlic** 4 cloves  
**thyme sprigs** 8  
**rosemary leaves** 1tbsp, chopped  
**dry sherry** 50ml  
**vegetable stock** 100ml  
**bay leaves** 3  
**judion, cannellini or butter beans**  
1 x 500g jar or 2 x 400g cans

Cut the aubergines in half lengthways. Score them, lattice style, on their cut sides. Warm the olive oil in a large, shallow pan and place the aubergine, cut side down in the pan. Over a moderate heat, lightly brown the aubergines, then remove from the pan. (You may need to do this in batches, depending on the size of your aubergines and your pan.)

Set the oven at 200C/gas 6. While the aubergines are browning, peel the onions, cut them in half from root to tip and then into thick segments. Peel and thinly slice the garlic. Return the pan to the heat, add a little more oil, then the onions and garlic, thyme sprigs, rosemary and bay leaves. Let the onions cook for 12-15 minutes, stirring now and again, until they have softened and are showing a little golden colour on the edges.

Pour in the sherry, and the stock, season with salt and black pepper and let it bubble for a minute or two, then place in the oven and leave for 45 minutes or until the aubergines are almost fully soft and the onions golden. Carefully lift out the aubergines, add the beans and their bottling liquid, and stir to mix with the onions and aromatics. Replace the aubergines and return to the oven for 20 minutes until all is hot, soft and fragrant. ➤





Oven ready:  
baked  
aubergine with  
white beans  
and thyme.  
Facing page:  
banana brioche  
pudding





# IN YOUR ELEMENT

POLZEATH BEACH  
NORTH CORNWALL  
50.5763° N, 4.9201° W  
16:02





# Food & drink

## Nigel Slater

### A light and quivering custard held crumbled sweet bread and, rare in my kitchen, baked bananas

#### Banana brioche pudding

A light, slightly sweeter version of the classic bread and butter pudding. I often use soft brioche buns for this, curiously easier to get hold of than a loaf sometimes. If no form of brioche is available, use a soft white loaf such as milk bread instead. *Serves 4*

For the custard:

**full-cream milk** 250ml

**double cream** 250ml

**green cardamoms** 6

**eggs** 3, large plus 1 yolk

**caster sugar** 125g

**bananas** 3, medium

**brandy** 1 tbsp (optional)

**brioche** 6 x 1cm-thick slices or 4 brioche buns, 300g total weight

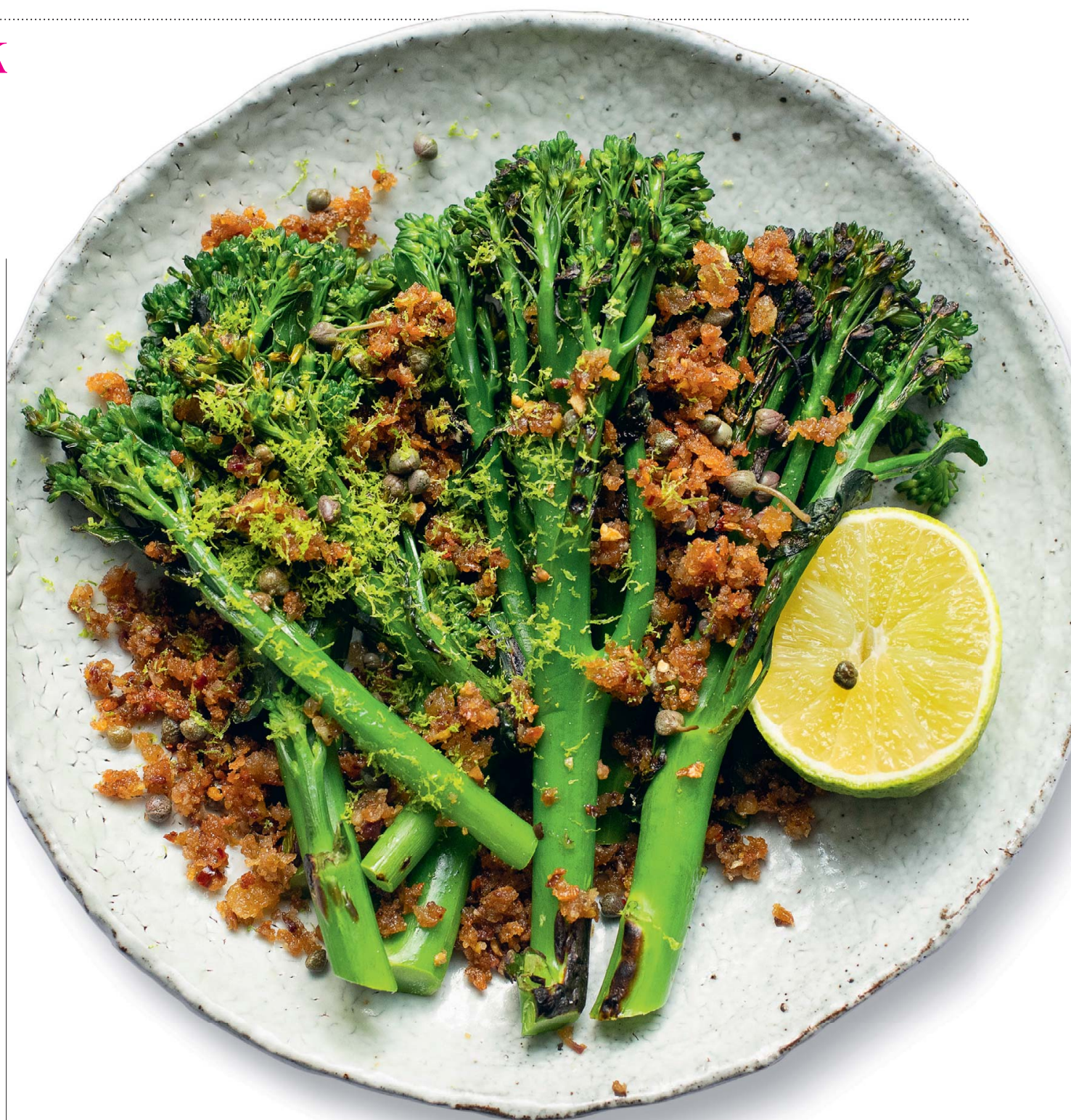
**orange zest**

**caster sugar** a little to finish

Set the oven at 180C/gas mark 4. Pour the milk and cream into a saucepan – I use a nonstick milk pan. Crack open the cardamom pods, remove the seeds and grind to a fine powder using a pestle and mortar. (By all means use ready ground cardamom, but that means you will lose something of the spice's magic.) Put the ground cardamom into the milk and cream and bring to the boil. As soon as the milk starts to rise up the pan, remove immediately from the heat and set aside to infuse.

Beat together the eggs, extra yolk and sugar until pale and thick. Pour the milk and cream through a sieve and stir until thoroughly mixed.

Slice the bananas into ½cm pieces. Tear the brioche into bits roughly 4 cm square. There is no need to be too accurate here. Pour a little of the custard into a 22cm diameter baking dish. Layer the pieces of brioche and the bananas in the dish, sprinkling over a little of the brandy as you go, then pour over the rest of the cardamom custard. Grate a little orange zest over the surface. Scatter with a little caster sugar and bake for 40 minutes until lightly puffed and golden. ■



### Nigel's midweek dinner

#### Broccoli with green olive crumbs

Photograph  
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

#### The recipe

A side dish for the autumn, but also a good one for serving with soft polenta. First make the crumbs: tear apart 60g of coarse-textured fresh **bread** and put it in the bowl of a food processor. Add 60g of stoned **green olives**, 1 peeled clove of **garlic** and 1 tsp of **dried chilli flakes**, then process to coarse crumbs. Pour in 50ml of **olive oil**. Finely grate, but do not add, the zest of 1 **lemon** and have ready 1 tbsp of drained **capers**.

Put a medium-sized pan of water on to boil. Trim 450g of fresh, bright green long-stemmed **broccoli**. Drop the broccoli into the boiling water and let it cook for 1 minute only. The colour will brighten, but the stems should stay crisp. Drain immediately. Warm a griddle pan.

Put the broccoli on the hot griddle for 4 or 5 minutes until lightly toasted. The exact timing will depend on the heat of your pan. Turn and cook the other side.

Warm a dry pan over a moderate heat

and add the oiled and seasoned crumbs. Cook until toasted and the garlic is fragrant, moving them around the pan so they don't burn. Stir in the lemon zest and capers.

Transfer the grilled broccoli to a serving plate, then scatter with the hot, toasted crumbs and a crumble of **sea salt**. A trickle of olive oil is a welcome addition.

◆ This is a good dish for serving on rounds of thick, olive-oily toast, for tossing with ribbons of pappardelle or fettuccine or for piling on top of soft polenta. I also use it as a side dish for any grilled meat or fish.

◆ Crisp the broccoli in water and ice cubes for 20 minutes before cooking.

◆ If you use the thick-stemmed broccoli instead, slice each floret in half or quarters – it will cook more evenly.

◆ I like to keep the leaves on the broccoli. They are too good to discard. If the stems are on the thick side, slice them, too. ■



# Food & drink

## Jay Rayner



Twitter @jayrayner1

There were few bright sparks and the boast of good times crumbles to nothing at Block Soho

### Block Soho

Clarion House,  
2 Saint Anne's Court,  
London W1F 0AZ  
(020 3376 9999;  
blocksoho.com).  
Starters **£9-£17**  
Sunday lunch **£15-£26**  
Desserts **£9**  
Wines from **£27**

Hung on the wall above the urinal at Block Soho was a promotional poster for the Sunday lunch I had recently completed. It bore the slogan: "Whole joints, big flames, good times." Finally I felt as if I was being looked after. Because if there's one thing I can use, it's clear criteria by which to judge a restaurant. So, let's start in the middle.

Once upon a time there were indeed big flames at this site. It's a wide, low-slung space on a pedestrianised alleyway between Wardour and Dean Streets in London's Soho. Over the years it has been many things: American deli, tapas bar, Dante's seventh circle of vodka-drenched hell.

In 2015, the company behind both the steak restaurant Goodman and the hilarious luxe steak and seafood joint Beast turned it into a great-value seafood place called Rex and Mariano, but apparently there weren't enough people in London wanting slurpy, salty clams at £6 a go, because Londoners are idiots. Instead, it became Zelman Meats, named after the owner Mikhail Zelman. They did a small number of things – steaks, slow-roasted short rib, grilled oysters – really well. I recall a terrific Sunday lunch, with irregular Yorkshires the size of sombreros, crisp, dark-hued roasties and slices of what I referred to then as taffeta-pink slices of beef.

To cook their steaks, they built a huge charcoal grill into the open kitchen and, when the animal fats dripped, the flames really did become very big indeed; so much so that they erected a transparent protective screen to protect people sitting at the counter edging the kitchen from third-degree burns. They'd sit transfixed as if nose to nose with a caged wild animal. In a way, they were.

Zelman's closed during lockdown, but little has been done to the space since the new owners arrived, bar some expensive branding on the walls. They have retained the circular marble trough just inside the door along with the booths and high-tops. Sadly, though, it seems the caged animal has been released. If there are big flames in this new restaurant, they're not in the open kitchen this Sunday lunchtime. It contains just two hassled-looking cooks. The grill is unlit.

Which brings me to the promise of "whole joints". At Block Soho on Sundays there's a choice of pork, lamb or beef. The latter arrives in slices. If those slices came off whole joints, I would expect them to be pink, which is exactly what they prepared for our photographer at a later date. Instead, ours had been seared on all sides like minute steaks. We should take their word for it that ours came from a single joint. But then why sear it? Not that it makes much difference: it's a tough, extremely indifferent



The beef arrives in slices seared on all sides. Unlike those later prepared for our photographer

Writing on the wall: (from left) roast beef lunch; the dining room; smoked pulled pork; seafood cocktail; beef carpaccio; seasonal fruit mess; and chocolate tart

piece of meat. The pork is wet and dreary and comes without crackling, which I regard as a personal insult. The lamb is a wintry shade of grey as, at times, am I. These three dishes with sides cost between £21 and £24 for three slices. You can have one of all three, but that will cost you £26 for exactly the same amount of meat. The menu also offers "Roasts – fresh from the sea". Apparently, the fish didn't fancy it and stayed there. They have no fish, unlike the chippie across the alley which has loads.

The meat dishes come with stodgy, strikingly uniform Yorkshires. God's own country might see this as cause for a defamation suit. There are dense, pallid roast potatoes the colour of disappointment, and "charred" batons of root vegetable that are undercooked and present little evidence of charring. This is unsurprising given the apparent lack of flames with which to char them. Let's hear it, then, for the pleasing buttered cabbage. Let's also hear it for what they call "block gravy". It makes me wonder what sort of block was involved. It's thick and sludgy and bears a striking resemblance to





something I once made from a packet at home, for shits and giggles. This is remarkable, given they must have made it from scratch.

Before that there is, well, food. I keep looking at the photo on my phone of the “pulled” pork on sourdough toast in thick apple gravy; it looks chopped, which is a different thing entirely. The non-meat option of creamed chargrilled celeriac is under-seasoned. There is a miserly portion of beef carpaccio with bluntly shaved parmesan, but disguised nicely by squiggles from a squeeze bottle of thick balsamic dressing. The best option is the English seafood cocktail of prawns and crayfish, as it should be at £17.

Interestingly, for a restaurant promoting their Sunday lunch offering, the one dessert they don't have today is the apple crumble. A dark chocolate tart has a hefty filling and soft, damp pastry. I ask if they make it on site. They say they do. Nice that they've taken responsibility. The cream in a seasonal fruit mess has been overwhipped and is split. We hunt through the clumping globules of dairy fat for the promised meringue, but eventually call off the search, exhausted. It's true that restaurants often find domestic food rituals like Sunday lunch hard to pull off. Zelman Meats managed a good one; this, however, was described by one of my companions as the sort of thing you'd be served in an underachieving pub smelling of wet dog, for £6.95. As that companion is my wife I'm not going to argue.

What drives me nuts is that significant amounts of money have been spent here on branding and sloganising; on creating the idea of a cool restaurant. But just saying stuff doesn't make it so, if you don't also invest in good ingredients and people able to prepare them adequately. For reference, during the rest of the week there's a menu of salt-aged steak cuts, but don't hope for bargains. The ribeye here is 47% more expensive per 100g than at Hawksmoor, the rump is 33% more expensive and the fillet 31% more expensive.

Credit must go to the front-of-house staff who deliver this dreadfully disappointing, poor-value experience with charm and efficiency. Sadly, charm and efficiency will only get you so far. For here I am stood in the bog, staring at the words “good times” on the poster in front of me, thinking, “I really could have done with some of those.” It's time to zip up and go home. ■

## Notes on chocolate

Mousse lessons for a bittersweet milestone, for Annalisa Barbieri



Some of you, like me, will have taken a child to university these past few weeks. I never went to university (shock horror), so this is a new chapter for my family. For her last Sunday dinner en famille, I asked my eldest what she wanted as a dessert; she chose chocolate mousse. For years, when my children were smaller, this was a regular at the Sunday lunch table. We'd distract my youngest and steal her chocolate mousse and all pretend we didn't know where it was, and we did exactly this again in a small, bittersweet moment.

Most of us have a chocolate mousse recipe passed down the generations, but in order to not get too sentimental I tried a new one from *The Joy of Chocolate* by Paul A Young. The chocolate seized when I put in the egg yolks, I could see it going dull and grainy.

There is no return for chocolate that does this if you ever want it to have a shiny finish, but it was for mousse, and I refused to be dictated to by mere science, so I whisked in some hot water and it came together rather beautifully.

A chocolate subscription (so many places now offer them, but **Cocoa Runners** remains my favourite, not least because my own curated box is on there) is a great gift for a student. Who can afford good chocolate on a student loan?

Tom, a reader, wrote in to recommend Cardiff-based **Heist** chocolate and I ordered some bars. The Cereal Milk, £6.50, is a white chocolate with toasted cornflakes. Amazing. The packaging is glorious and the 59% Milk was as creamy as any I've tasted. They also make lovely student gifts.



## Wines of the week

For sheer quality and variety the wines of Alsace can't be beaten.  
*By David Williams*

🐦 @Daveydaibach



**Domaine Léon Boesch Sylvaner Pierres Rouge, Alsace**  
**France 2020**  
£16.75, *Vine Trail*

Ambi-cultural Alsace has always been one of my favourite wine regions. There's a very pronounced Teutonic aspect to life in this part of France on the eastern side of the

Vosges mountains. Tasting its wines in situ, as you tour the pretty villages with their mix of French municipal and timber-framed, Grimm's fairytale-style architecture, only adds to the dizzying cross-cultural effect. Ultimately, however, what makes Alsace so attractive as a region is its concentration of vigneron and the quality of the wines they make. People such as Matthieu Boesch, who like so many of his colleagues, works his 14.5ha of vines biodynamically and, among other characterful wines, produces this gently incisive, mandarin, herb and pear-scented dry white.

**Josmeyer Pinot Gris Le Fromenteau, Alsace**  
**France 2018**  
£31, *Buon Vino*

Another factor that makes Alsace producers stand out is the sheer number of different wines they make. That's partly because Alsace winegrowers like to

make wines that show off their different vineyard plots; and partly because they have so many official grape varieties to choose from. There's a certain cerebral pleasure in puzzling the differences between a gewürztraminer and a pinot gris made from grapes grown in the soils of the Hengst grand cru, versus an elegant riesling from the granitic Schlossberg. Then you have the variable of each producer's winemaking signature: the spicy tea-like infusions of Jean-Pierre Frick (lescaves.co.uk), the nimble but vividly concentrated Domaine Bohn (vinetrail.co.uk) and the subtle spice found in Josmeyer's pinot gris.



**Dopff au Moulin Crémant d'Alsace Cuvée Julien, Alsace**  
**France NV**  
£13.95, *The Wine Society*

Alsace also has an increasingly profitable line in bottlings made from the grape varieties of Champagne and Burgundy. When it comes to still wines, producers can't put

chardonnay on an Alsace label, so the beautifully balanced, stony Zind by Zind-Humbrecht 2020 (£21.49, Waitrose), a blend of chardonnay and auxerrois, has to be bottled as a Vin de France. Chardonnay is, however, used in the region's often-excellent Crémant d'Alsace, although the creamy but fresh Dopff au Moulin Cuvée Julien, blends pinot blanc with auxerrois. Meanwhile, the quality of Alsace's pinot noir reds, once seen as something of a sideline in a region dominated by whites, has improved enormously in the past decade, with wines from Domaines Muré, Bohn and Léon Boesch standing on a recent visit.





# Style Notebook

Fashion editors **JO JONES & HELEN SEAMONS**



**Licensed to thrill**  
Celebrate 60 years of James Bond with a gift box of six 007-themed socks featuring Bond's most iconic looks. £72, [thelondonsockexchange.net](http://thelondonsockexchange.net)



**Plastic fantastic**  
Damson Madder's new XY collection includes organic cotton T-shirts and knitwear made from recycled plastic. From £75, [damsonmadder.com](http://damsonmadder.com)



**High society**  
Check out Dune London's new bespoke, limited-edition styles, some with pearl detailing. From £200, [dunelondon.com](http://dunelondon.com)



**In on the act**  
Kaia Gerber is teaming up with Zara for a 30-piece capsule collection, drawing on 1990s style. From £19.99, [zara.com](http://zara.com)

GETTY IMAGES



1. Windproof raincoat £34.99, [hm.com](http://hm.com) 2. Top £160, [essentiel-antwerp.com](http://essentiel-antwerp.com) 3. Corduroy jacket £280, and matching trousers £155, both [yolke.co.uk](http://yolke.co.uk) 4. Mini skirt £35.99, [mango.com](http://mango.com) 5. Dress £45 [marksandspencer.com](http://marksandspencer.com)

## Wild things *Roar into autumn with leopard print*



The new leopard print has evolved from its rock 'n' roll roots and softened to become an everyday neutral

For AW22 we saw leopard print reworked across the runways in new fresh ways, reimagined in different scales and finishes, from maxi dresses at **Etro** to knee-high boots at **Sportmax**.

Treat leopard print as a neutral and use it accordingly, adding separates to your wardrobe like M&S's crepe animal-print slim-fit trousers (£35), **Hush's** leopard jacquard cardigan (£99) and **Arket's** satin skirt (£69), perfect styled with knee-high

leather boots or trainers. Animal print also works well with poppy colours. Style a bold turquoise trouser with a leopard-print top, as seen at **Essentiel Antwerp** (2, above) or a bomber jacket.

Or go maximalist leopard with a dress, as Ashley Graham did recently on the *Today* show (pictured left). We love M&S's easy cotton style with pockets (5) and **Essentiel Antwerp's** smocked-neck style (£290) worn with stompy boots. There are plenty of rental gems to be found, like **Rixo's** rose and leopard dress (from £37) at [hurrcollective.com](http://hurrcollective.com), plus great pieces from **Ganni** (from £27-£58). **By Rotation** offers

several coats, including a faux fur **Anthropologie**-style (£44 for a week's hire), or pick up a previous season markdown piece from **The Outnet**, like **Stand Studio's** cosy coat (£298, down from £459).

Finally, leopard accessories can be used to add interest to a look. **Boden's** low-heel slingbacks (£120) would look great with workwear, or try **Dune's** high-heel court (£52) to bring a rock edge to a jeans-and-jumper look.

Meanwhile, **La Redoute's** circular crossbody bag (£30), or **Asos's** buckle shoulder bag (inspired by **Fendi's** baguette) (£22) will add the perfect finishing touch. ■





# Fashion's new prince

Designer Charles de Vilморin, hailed as a 'creative prodigy', is bringing his Midas-touch to the historic house of Rochas

Words **SCARLETT CONLON**  
Photograph **ADELINE MAY**

**C**harles de Vilморin can't hide his excitement about an imminent arrival to his Paris apartment: an Italian greyhound named Terreur. "In France, we have this funny thing where each year there is a letter that you have to name your pet by, and this year it's T," he explains with a smile. "If he's cute and calm, then it will be funny; if he's uncontrollable it works, too."

It's said with a low-key confidence that belies the time-consuming introduction of a household pet, let alone the amount of work de Vilморin already has on his plate. At just 24, the young French designer is not only the wunderkind of haute couture with the eponymous brand he launched mid-pandemic in 2020, but in February 2021 he also became the creative director of one of France's oldest fashion houses, Rochas, for whom he showed his SS23 collection last week.

That means he has to produce no fewer than six collections a year between the two brands. Yet de Vilморin responds to any suggestion of pressure with a nonchalance and a why-not attitude – sentiments articulately communicated with a matter-of-fact, "Voilà!" "It's great, I get to learn every day," he says. "Once

one collection is finished I start another one, which is good for my creativity." Plus, he says, "It's two entirely different structures and I work in two different cities for each, so it's easy for me to separate the two. Voilà!"

The designer is happily ensconced in the bohemian 17th arrondissement of Batignolles, where he runs his brand. He also spends one day a month at the Rochas HQ and studios in Milan. And it is there that we meet, in the hotel he uses when in town, nestled in the rejuvenated studenty Porta Romana district.

"Rochas is a century old and has had a lot of creative directors with huge stories and characteristics. I need to understand and respect this in order to continue the story of the brand," he says. "And there is, of course, a commercial expectation that I have to make it grow." His own gender-neutral couture brand, meanwhile, "is more artistic, experimental and I work with my hands a lot – this character and energy is totally different in my brain."

Rochas, says de Vilморin, took a risk on him. After launching his fashion brand the year before having graduated from the Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale in 2020, he gained quick traction on social media for his handmade creations and the cool crowd that followed him – things that clearly appealed to the bosses at Rochas. This collaboration follows in the footsteps of several French heritage labels – see Lanvin, Schiaparelli and Courrèges – which eschewed more established designers in favour of the fresh-perspective-meets-Midas-touch that a Gen-Z designer can potentially bring to their brand.

"They were courageous because it's my first experience," he says, pulling out his iPad to show me the initial sketches he created for them as a part of the interview process. "Now, I look at it and think, 'Oh no, it's impossible!' It was super naive, but I think that's why they liked it."

De Vilморin's signature handpainted

**'I get to learn every day': (top) Charles de Vilморin in his Paris apartment. Right: three of his colourful designs for Rochas and his eponymous label**

illustrations and primary palettes tap-dance the line between merry and macabre, plugging into an aesthetic more aligned with the extravagance of Christian Lacroix and the arty rebellion of Franco Moschino in the 1980s and 1990s than many of his contemporaries. The young designer's initial ambition, to be a theatre director, speaks to this very drama that he was first attracted to as a child.

"I thought it was so fun to work with music and light and silhouettes and clothes and decor – the whole universe around theatre," he says. But it was encountering John Galliano's rhapsodic showmanship at Dior Couture that changed his path. "It was 2010 and Galliano's couture show – full of red and black – *magnifique!*" he enthuses, losing himself in the memory. "I saw this show and I said, 'OK, I'm done.' I was 10."

Not all 10-year-olds would know what a couture show is, let alone be familiar with one of its 20th-century masters, but artistry and fashion run in the family. The eldest of five children, he grew up just outside Paris, where his artist mother, fashion-financier father and great aunt – the poet Louise de Vilморin – instilled in the family an "artistic and poetic atmosphere". It was this that he drew on to build his brand.

De Vilморin has since blazed a trail that saw him nominated for the prestigious LVMH prize last year. A gender-neutral couture house modelled on his friends bucks the status quo in couture circles and shortly after our interview he announced his departure from the official schedule (in which only the Chaneles and Diors are usually invited to take part), instead opting to present the brand on his time and turf. It was, he says, a mutual decision that gave him "a new perspective and a bit more freedom".

He has been hailed a "creative prodigy" by *Vogue France* – which many would struggle to live up to at his age. But de Vilморin is undaunted. "For sure, in like 10 years' time, I am like Galliano at the end of one of his shows," he laughs, referring to the dramatic catwalk bow of his hero. "I'm too shy and too small for the moment. But in 10 years' time I will have the confidence." ■ [rochas.com](http://rochas.com)





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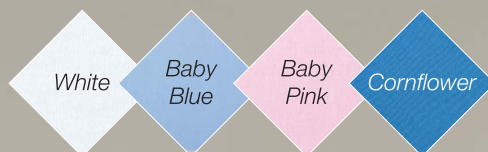
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# Beauty Funmi Fetto

@FunmiFetto



## Keep it fresh with a simple wash of blush

How awe-inspiring that some people feel no intimidation around eyeshadow palettes. All those shades! The skill-set! What to do? Universal neutrals such as pinky-browns are an easy route in. As are less dense textures, like blushers. When you don't want the "no-makeup makeup look" but also don't fancy a pigment-rich intensity, a single shade of blush provides a fresh wash of colour around the eyes and cheeks. Finish off with a matte hint of colour on the lips.

1. **Dior Rouge Blush** £40, [dior.com](http://dior.com)
2. **Saie Lip Blur** £20, [cultbeauty.co.uk](http://cultbeauty.co.uk)
3. **Violette\_FR Bisou Blush** £37, [violettefr.com](http://violettefr.com)
4. **Jones Road The Best Blush** £29, [jonesroadbeauty.com](http://jonesroadbeauty.com)
5. **Sensai Lash Lengthening Mascara** £31, [harrods.com](http://harrods.com)



## I can't do without...

A nourishing  
lipgloss that  
will really make  
you smile

### Vieve Lip Dew Glossy Lip Oil

£17 [cultbeauty.co.uk](http://cultbeauty.co.uk)

I have always been a diehard bright lipstick kind of girl. Actually no, not always. I was once afraid the colour on my full lips would draw attention to them. When I got over that (thank you, age), I began to embrace the brightest and the best of reds and pinks and even, shock horror, oranges (a reddish-brownish orange, not fluoro). And with all these colours it was always matte. Even when, back in the day, the terrible formulas would dry my lips to crushed concrete, shine held zero interest for me. So I am surprised to find myself inching towards a gloss. I love that modern glosses are not like their nauseating predecessors – cloying scent, ridiculous packaging... Today's gloss is much more sophisticated. Gloss is also easy. Even the cack-handed can apply it sans mirror. And the formulas are no longer style over substance. They look good, but they are also good for your lips. Like this one by Vieve, the brand by Scottish makeup artist Jamie Genevieve. It includes raspberry seed oil extract, vitamin E and green tea extract to soothe and heal dry lips. Unlike other 'lip oils' however, it is not 'oily' and your lips absorb it beautifully without losing any glossiness. I'm currently obsessed. Don't get me wrong, I haven't given up on my matte brights, but right now I love being part of the glossy brigade.

## On my radar

A pore protector,  
floral scent and  
a modern classic

### Hero serum

You can't shrink pores, but you can improve them. This serum reduces excessive oiliness and minimises the look of enlarged pores in three days. **Strivectin Super Shrink Pore Minimizing Serum**, £62, [boots.com](http://boots.com)



### Cold comfort

This excellent makeup remover, cleanser and overnight mask is a modern take on one of beauty's old-school classics, the cold cream. Perfect for dull, dehydrated skins. **The Seated Queen Cold Cream**, £39, [libertylondon.com](http://libertylondon.com)



### Juicy fruit

Myrica (bayberry) has been blended with strawberries, tangerine, rose, patchouli, pink pepper and rum to create this fruity floral musk scent. And it's delicious. **Miller Harris Myrica Muse**, £95, [millerharris.com](http://millerharris.com)







Words **CAROLYN ASOME**  
Photographs **MICHEL FIGUET**



# Trust your taste

The elegant home of designer Samantha Hauvette near Paris shows that different styles and periods can all work together



Picture this: a Charlotte Perriant 'Rio' table and sofa by Hauvette & Madani. Facing page: tiles and an open fire in the sitting room





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**M**ostly my home is about catering to the ‘Aperol hour,’” laughs Samantha Hauvette. “There are comfortable spaces and cushions in the living room where you can sit on the floor and gather friends together and low tables that you can stick snacks on.”

What you will actually find on entering the Paris home she shares with her husband, Swan, and their three children, Achille, May and Gaia, is the richness of Barbara Hepworth-inspired curves – and a paean to Ricardo Boffil’s Brutalist architecture and Donald Judd’s furniture. Hauvette is one half of the French design studio Hauvette & Madani, whose magpie approach to design deftly weaves references from the 1930s and 1970s to create elegant interiors with a patinated modernism.

Her home is a celebration of natural light, raw materials – marble wood, zellige tiles – and a sprinkling of family heirlooms to produce a vernacular that is as sophisticated as it is family friendly.

“It was two years of searching before we finally stumbled upon this house, which had been untouched since the 70s,” says Hauvette. The duplex apartment in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, is housed in a former end of terrace 19th-century townhouse.

“It comprises the ground floor and the first floor and yet it has the feel of a country house. The previous occupants had created a garden, a very beautiful Japanese one, although it wasn’t suitable at all for young children. I knew it would be a lot of work (it took 10 months to transform), but there was already a pleasing family feel when we first went to visit.”

The first floor includes the reception areas, the kitchen made from varnished macassar ebony and lava-stone worktops and a master suite. The lower floor, meanwhile, is dedicated to children and includes a family room, guest room, office and bedrooms. Both floors have direct access to the garden.

To retain an open plan feel, Hauvette installed a system of three arches, two of which feature rotating mirrors to capitalise on any light, given the house’s north-facing aspect.

The living room mixes styles and periods with a reissued Charlotte Perriand “Rio” table by Cassina made from rattan and natural oak, a Bouroullec lamp and an elegant green velvet sofa designed by Hauvette & Madani. Above this hang paintings by Jean Dupuy and Léon Tutundjian, a photo of Jean Arp’s studio by Willy Maywald, and a drawing of Hercules found at the Galerie Française. On the coffee table is a sculpture by her grandmother, Yvette Hauvette, and an India Mahdavi ashtray. Above the dining table is a portrait of a great-great aunt painted by her great-great uncle. Other family pieces include the silver chandelier from her uncle.

It is these more personal objects in her home that remain her favourites. “I grew up in a family with nice objects, no one was a designer, but my grandmother was



**‘I look out my bedroom window and the view is of two large palm trees. It makes me feel as if I’m on holiday’**



a sculptor, my uncle was a painter and my mother did houses up beautifully.”

Indeed, the influences of these previous generations blend effortlessly with contemporary furniture and pieces.

She and Lucas Madani, co-founder of Hauvette & Madani, whom she met at the Ecole Camondo design school, have recently created a collection of furniture with a 70s twist. In keeping with the tradition of the decorators of the 1920s and 1930s, each piece is handmade in a limited edition by French master craftsmen.

She thinks many get it wrong when they try to decorate their home by copying a Pinterest board or the home of an interior designer. “I think you need to trust your taste. If it’s yours, you will blend everything together so don’t be scared about going for it, but don’t try to create the space of someone else.”

Light is also important to her. “People don’t always use enough indirect light, so there are lots of low spotlights from the window, the walls; you need to envelop yourself in light.”

Just as meticulously planned are her children’s bedrooms. She liked the idea of her kids sharing “*Mary Poppins*-style”. The walls are covered in a Trustworth wallpaper that matches the blue carpet

**Light and shade: (from left) an arch leading through to the kitchen; the bedroom with a lamp by Nocturne Workshop; terracotta colours in the sitting room; and Samantha Hauvette**



and modular USM storage module by Didier Berény and Georges Store.

“I wanted it to be considered, so that they enjoy where they are; also so they don’t invade the sitting room too often upstairs.” She laughs, “or at least that’s the theory. And anyway, who said a home should just be designed for adults?”

Toys and screens are relegated to the family room, which is no less considered and includes a pink Togo sofa, a vintage Plexiglas coffee table and sculpture by Catherine Dix.

Her favourite space is her bedroom, where she spends the most time, even when not attending to a month-old baby. Couleur Chanvre linen and Maison de Vacances cushions cover her bed. The bedside table is her own design, on which sits a lamp by Nocturne Workshop, and above is work by Didier Berény.

“I read and work here. I love the two large windows in front of my bed and that when I wake up: I look out and my view is of two large palm trees. It makes me feel as if I’m on holiday. But also, like the best interiors – and what we always try to create in our work, there’s a timeless quality to this room, it appears as if it’s always been here.” ■ [hauvette-madani.com](http://hauvette-madani.com)



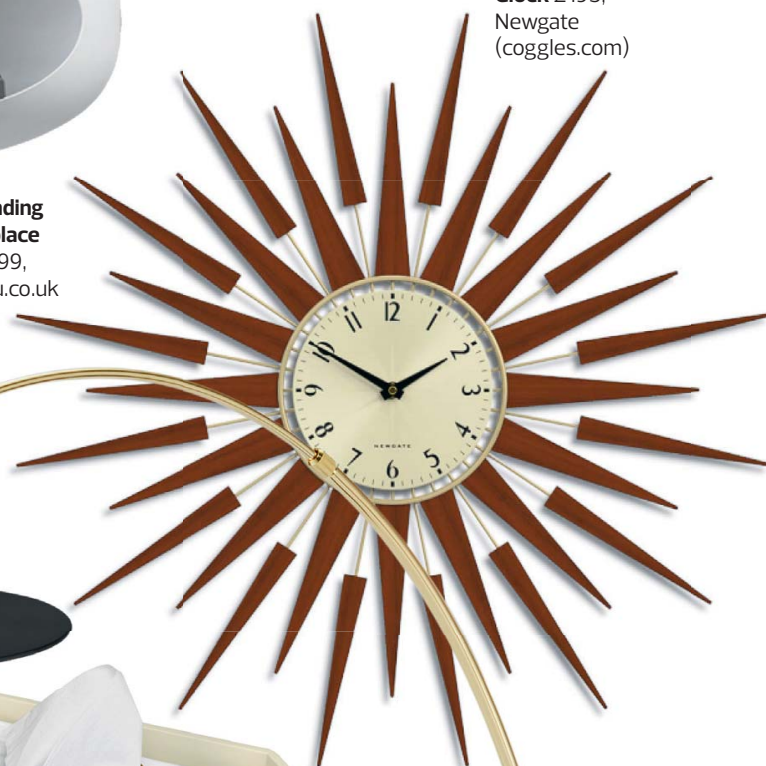
# Interiors

**Macramé hanging planter**  
£35, sculpd.co.uk



**Standing fireplace**  
£1,599, lefeu.co.uk

**Clock** £195,  
Newgate  
(coggles.com)



**Lamp** £98, made.com



**Tissue box**  
£245, thelacquer company.com



**Cactus** £74,  
thestem.co.uk



**Vase** £85,  
Pols Potten  
(johnlewis.com)



**Enamel steel bowl**  
£8, Bemus  
(selfridges.com)

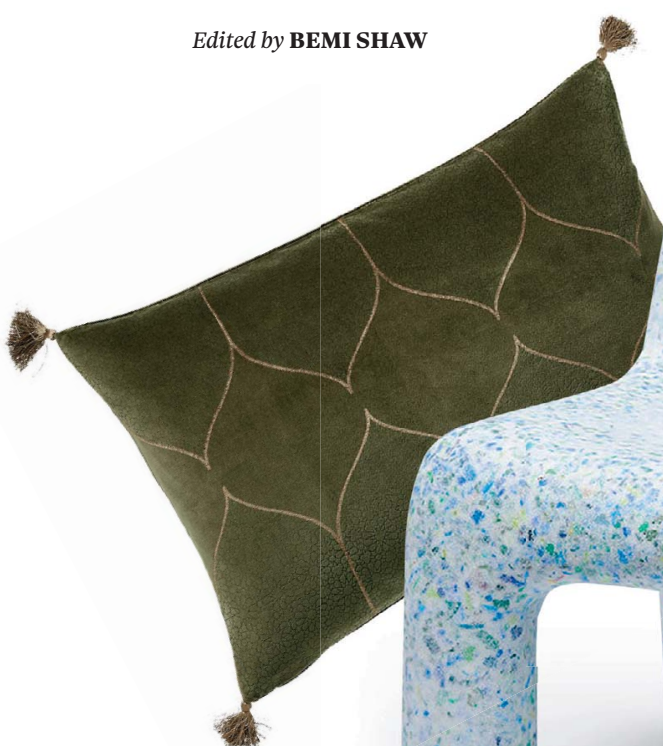


**Wall shelf** £810,  
kavehome.com

## In the groove

Add a nostalgic feel to any room with accessories and accents of the 70s

Edited by **BEMI SHAW**



**Cushion** £32.50,  
rituals.com



**Charlie recycled-plastic chair**  
£190, Ecobirdy  
(selfridges.com)



# Gardens James Wong

🐦 @Botanygeek

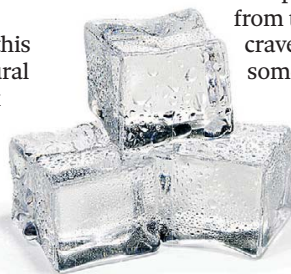


## Save ice cubes for your drink, not orchids...

About 10 years ago, I went to a truly amazing horticultural show just outside Amsterdam. It was an exhibition by the very best houseplant growers of their newest creations all displayed on ultra-glossy stands. Right at the centre of the event space was what looked like an enormous music video set with theatrically oversized 1950s-style fridges on podiums. Between these were huge faux ice sculptures, and metre-high martini glasses filled to the brim with plastic ice cubes, all in *Miami Vice* lighting in shades of pink and blue. You might wonder what this all had to do with horticulture, until I explain that pouring out of all these props were the most immaculate *Phalaenopsis* orchids with a giant neon sign saying: "Just add ice". The idea was that the easiest way to water orchids is to simply add three ice cubes to their pot once a week and presumably, by extension, demonstrating how simple these plants were to care for.

More than a decade later, the message of this campaign still echoes over social media, magazines and in overheard conversations at garden centres. But where does the idea that tropical plants should be watered with ice come from?

Perhaps surprisingly, this is a traditional horticultural technique that goes back years before this particular marketing campaign, and at least back to 1980s Singapore where my



grandmother taught it to me. But this wasn't a method of ensuring a slow drip feed of a measured amount of moisture. It was more about the cooling effect of ice on the plant. It was used to coax plants from the tropical highlands, who crave a fresh, spring-like climate, to somehow be happy in the sweltering heat of the lowlands.

*Phalaenopsis* orchids at the time, alongside azaleas and some unusual begonias, were exotic new introductions to lowland horticulture and,

frankly, the only way to keep them happy – prior to the advent of chilled glasshouses – was to cool their root systems with daily applications of ice. As so much of *Phalaenopsis* culture made its way to Holland via southeast Asia, I can only imagine this would be the most logical origin, with Dutch growers learning of the technique, but not the reason why.

Yet what makes perfect sense in the stifling 32C heat of Singapore is not directly transferable to the 18C of the European living room, which is ironically

already at the perfect temperature to mimic tropical highlands. Despite the fact that a small, short-term study at the University of Ohio found the ice to have no adverse effect on orchid flowering at all, I can't imagine that the chilling effect is beneficial, especially over the long term. Even if it were, is constantly making and doling out ice for your orchids much easier than pouring on a splash of water once a week? I am not sure. Moral of the story... If you find this tip works for you, by all means carry on, but please don't feel like it's something you have to do. ■



Staying cool: ice was traditionally used by growers to chill plants that came from the tropical highlands, such as the *Phalaenopsis* orchid

## Plot 29

Pumpkins sprawl amid the ghosts of summer's beans and peas.  
*By Allan Jenkins*

🐦 @allanjenkins21

October: the return of the winter constellations, the end of summertime. Our gardening and nights now drawing in. A time to gather seed.

A month to dig – or not, depending on your gardening style. We will turn over some of this year's 'new' soil. See how it's changed over summer. We'll give the plot a rough tidy. Like my mum's homemade haircuts. How we dreaded them.

We'll think about adding more organic manure.

Maybe horse muck or even cow if we are lucky. I have feelers out with friend and farmer Jane Scotter.

I both dread and love this time of year. The stark autumn silhouettes. The ghosts of summer's French beans and peas, the sunflower skeletons. The question of when best to store the hazel poles. All to be faced this month.

I'm still undecided about over-wintering broad beans, garlic and onion sets. I'll discuss with Howard. Our coriander, amaranth



Late bloomers: the rust-coloured sunflowers have been a joy this year

and orache is drying now. Its seed to be sorted over winter. We'll add Mexican cosmos, dill and calendula.

I have loved the late Hydra-headed, rust-coloured sunflowers, but next year we'll focus on a purer yellow. Though as with all my early plans I'm as likely to relent.

Our three pumpkins, a first for us, will be cut and cured. They've spread like burst river banks. Silvering leaves and vines encroaching on our neighbours.

The courgettes are

climbing. Though nothing compares to the morning glory. This my favourite of the Ukrainian seed this year. Greedy grasping vines. Perfect flowers, from a rich deep purple to a super delicate lavender stripe.

We'll look to save a pumpkin for Halloween. A candlelight of thanks in the coming night to mark the turn of the garden year.

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



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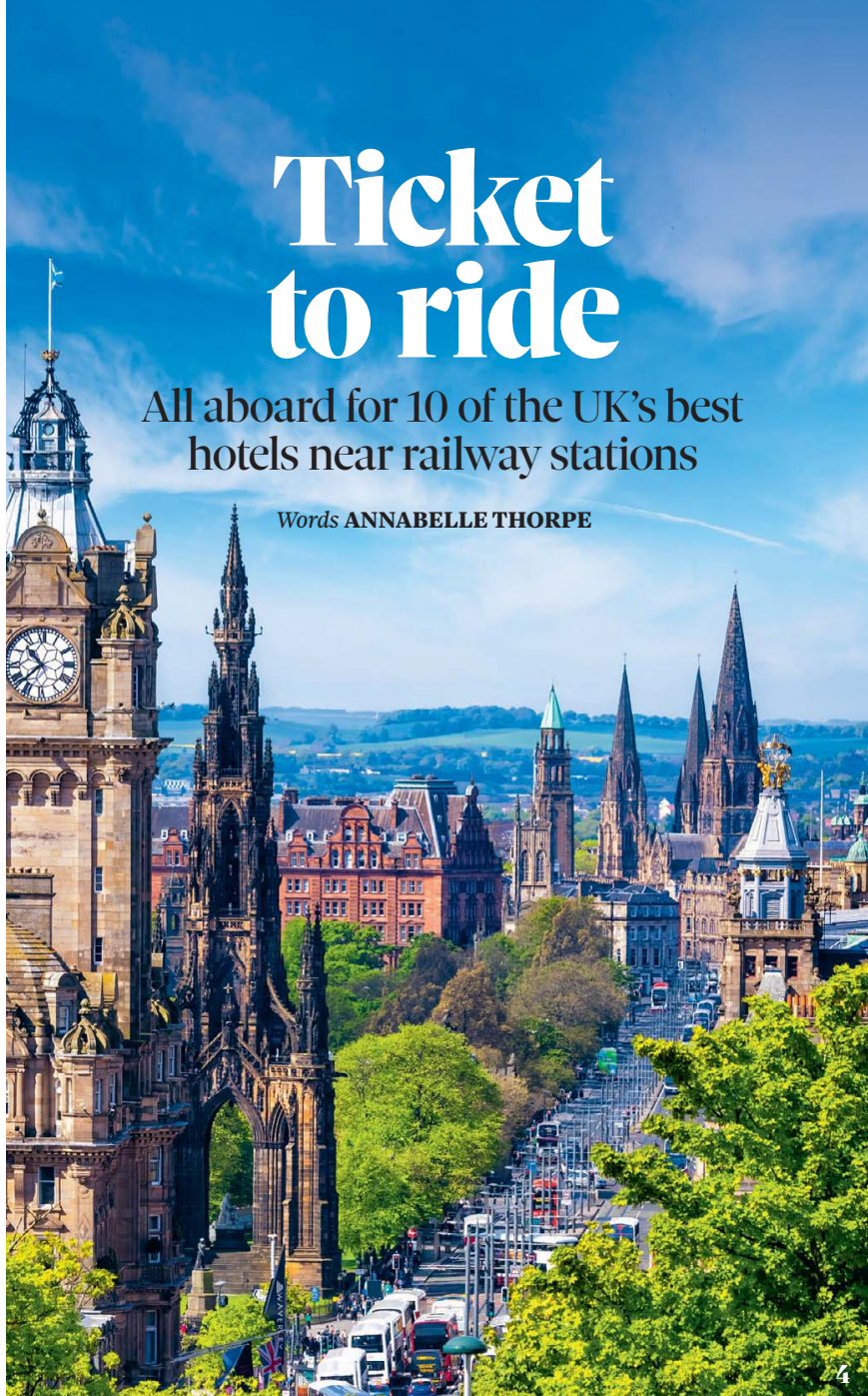


# Ticket to ride

All aboard for 10 of the UK's best hotels near railway stations

Words ANNABELLE THORPE

**1 The Balmoral, Edinburgh**  
Splash the cash on a weekend at Rocco Forte's gorgeous Scottish outpost, just a stone's throw from Edinburgh's Waverley station. Originally constructed as a station hotel, the building features sweeping staircases, intricate plasterwork and classical columns, which give the communal spaces an elegant Renaissance feel, in spite of being Victorian throughout. Rooms are characterised by Olga Polizzi's vibrant classicism, making it ideal for restful nights after dipping into the 500-variety Whisky Bar or Simon Lannon's classic brasserie dishes. *Doubles from £353 B&B; roccofortehotels.com*



walking trails, ideal for walking off the wickedly indulgent meals. *Doubles from £410 dinner, B&B; northcote.com*

**8 The Grand, Brighton**  
Living up to its name since a glitzy refurbishment a few years ago, Brighton's grand dame has plum position on the seafront, only a 15-minute stroll from the railway station and with all of the town's neighbourhoods – Kemptown, the Lanes and the bohemian North Laine area – right on the doorstep. Bedrooms have a pleasing Art Deco feel, while afternoon tea on the Victoria Terrace is a must – often best on blustery days, when you can watch the waves crashing from your seat. *Doubles from £215 B&B; grandbrighton.co.uk*

**9 Colwall Park Hotel, Malvern, Worcestershire**  
A classic country house surrounded by the rolling peaks of the Malvern Hills, Colwall is ideal for those looking for a car-free walking weekend, with Colwall station just moments away. The hotel can provide walking maps and picnic lunches, with a path through the hotel gardens leading directly up on to the hills. Back at base, the 22 rooms are comfortable, with dogs welcome in some. The fire-lit bar and buzzy restaurant offers hearty pub dishes. *Doubles from £85 B&B; colwall.co.uk*

**2 The Angel, Abergavenny**  
As the southern gateway to the Brecon Beacons, Abergavenny makes an ideal base for exploring the national park, with walks, cycle and bridle routes from the town. A classic coaching inn, the Angel is close to the station, and offers a cosy base with a bustling bar and restaurant – and one of Wales's finest afternoon teas. Rooms are luxurious, with pocket-sprung mattresses and Lewis & Wood fabrics. *Doubles from £160 room-only; angelabergavenny.com*

**3 Hampton Manor, Solihull**  
This 19th-century country manor set in 45 wooded acres is a five-minute stroll from Hampton-in-Arden station. A family-run hotel, it is also foodie heaven, with an in-house baker and nutritionist among its charming staff. Rooms are elegant, with William Morris wallpaper and antique furniture, but the restaurants are the ultimate treat, whether the Michelin-starred tasting menu in Peel, or hearty meat dishes grilled over coals in Smoke. *Doubles from £215 B&B; hamptonmanor.com*

**4 The Gannet, St Ives, Cornwall**  
Take the overnight train from Paddington to arrive at Carbis Bay station in time for breakfast and a stroll along the sands, before checking into the Gannet – a chic inn

with a cosy fire-lit bar, and sleek, cream-walled rooms (book a "Spot the Gannet" room for gorgeous sea views). Families are welcome, with cots and roll-away beds available. St Ives is a spectacular 30-minute walk along the coast and the C Spa at the neighbouring Carbis Bay Hotel offers an array of treatments. *Doubles from £265 B&B; gannetstives.co.uk*

**5 The Grand, York**  
Five minutes' walk from York station, this grand Edwardian building was the former headquarters of the North Eastern Railway, and is now the city's most



luxurious address. Service is everything here; a veritable army of concierges, doormen and waiters are on hand, with fine dining on offer at Legacy – a glorious room with original oak panelling and blueprint murals – or more informal brasserie fare in the Rise. Rooms are vast and supremely comfortable. *Doubles from £152 B&B; thegrandyork.co.uk*

**6 The Manor House, Moreton-in-Marsh, the Cotswolds**  
One of the few Cotswold towns with a train station, Moreton is just 90 minutes from Paddington, with the delightful Manor House hotel a few minutes' stroll through town. Dating back to the 16th century, it oozes country-house chic without a hint of chintz, while the Beagle Brasserie and more formal Mulberry restaurant offer indulgent suppers after a day's exploring. Dogs are welcome and the walled garden is a blissful retreat. *Doubles from £200 B&B; cotswold-inns-hotels.co.uk*

**7 The Northcote, Langho, Lancashire**  
Many visitors to the Northcote come for the Michelin-starred dining room, set in a cosy manor house, eight minutes' walk from Langho station. Room rates include a five-course dinner (and a vegetarian equivalent), with wine pairings available. The spectacular landscapes of the Forest of Bowland lie just outside the door, crisscrossed with



**10 Carey's Manor, Brockenhurst, Hampshire**  
Step off the train at Brockenhurst station and you will find yourself in the heart of the New Forest, with ponies ambling past and great swathes of woodland on all sides. Carey's Manor is just a few minutes' stroll: a classic manor house which has a first-rate spa, complete with full hydrotherapy suite and a Thai restaurant, Zen Garden, alongside contemporary British dishes in Cambium. The hotel has one of the country's widest collections of English wines, and there are lovely forest walks straight from the door. *Doubles from £180 B&B; careysmanor.com.* ■



# Self & wellbeing

Photograph **ROBERT ORMEROD**

## Once a year I lose myself in the Western Isles to walk and think – before going back to the life I love

Words **EDWARD DOCX**

West of Sligachan, the Black Cuillins rise – icebound in the winter and shrouded in cloud. I begin my walk beneath their sentry, Sgùrr nan Gilleann, the peak that heralds the start of the dark serrated ridge that coils around the most mysterious of all Scotland's lochs – Loch Coruisk, whose name means "cauldron of the waters".

This is the Isle of Skye, where you will find all seasons in a single day – blinding snow, pelting rain, snatching wind and sudden, inexplicable sun. And it's here I like to come to forget myself and to remember who I am.

My parents tell me that I was conceived in the Western Isles – a place they have always loved. They were married young – 22 and 21 – and I was born 11 months later. My first holidays were here. I would sit like an infant king in my high chair – reversed in the front seat of the old Austin Cambridge in which we would sleep, frost on the inside of the windows when we were awoken by the first light. We would drive through the pass of Glen Coe and then follow the road to the Isles, in search of remote glens and unexpected waterfalls, heading always for the coast where we would collect mussels on certain semi-secret beaches sheltered from the rocky shoreline. At the end of the day, the grey clouds would be underlit in every shade of gold and pink and pale vermillion.

After my siblings began to be born, we would stay in cottages and then houses. At the age of 21, I began to visit Skye and Mull and Knoydart with a group of my friends – to walk in the day and play cards at night. Now I go three times a year: in autumn with these same friends; at Christmas with my mother and father (now in their 70s) and my own children and whichever of my six siblings can make the trip. And once a year I go alone – to write, to think, to be.

But not to think or to be as I am in the rest of my life. Not to think busy, hurried, tangled. Not distracted or caught up or diverted or waylaid. Not as a husband, nor as a father, nor as a son, nor as a friend. But I go to think and to be in a different way. In a deeper way. Meditatively, perhaps. But not quite. More like thinking and being in the way of becoming just another human being again – and all the commonplace and miraculous that comprises.

*I often stay in the same* crofter's cottage directly beneath the Cuillins. I have never been able to sleep late. And so I write all morning – drinking too much tea and overbrewed coffee. The place is remote and I see nothing out of the window above the desk save for weather and the mountains and the occasional bird of prey that I wish I had the wit to distinguish as either eagle or buzzard. I hate going to the shops so I bring everything with me and cook for myself. Many writers



*'I often stay in the same crofter's cottage. Two nights in and I miss everyone and everything': Edward Docx on the Isle of Skye*

are reclusive and like being alone. But I am not one of them. I have lived in London all my adult life and I come from a large family; kinship and friendship have always been the best of my life's experience. So I always find this sudden solitude shocking and precipitous. Two nights in and I miss everyone and everything.

**I find this sudden solitude shocking and precipitous**

But this is a good thing, because behind the loneliness I can feel my appreciation of the people I love stirring and becoming conscious again. And I welcome this feeling, this re-realising of the great worth of the people in whose company I delight.

I am wary of the

word healing – my sister lost her baby daughter, my niece; my neighbour lost her daughter; one friend killed themselves; another was in a Covid coma for long months; my cousins were killed in a car accident when I was on nearby Mull years ago – and I know it is fatuous to talk of recovery in the company of such annihilating losses. Meanwhile, tragedy seems to attend every day of human history. So, no, it's not healing that the Western Isles offer. But it is, perhaps, this feeling of renewed awareness and perspective.

In the afternoons when I walk, for example, I sometimes think about the two sides of our nature. The urge to destroy and its associate, contempt. The urge to create and its associate, compassion. And I wonder – 300,000 years from now – which of these natures will prevail. And this leads me to think about the two Earths: the indifferent Earth and the magnanimous Earth – the place of volcanoes and



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Manduka PRO  
Body and soul. £124,  
yogastudiostore.com

Nerada Journey's end.  
£45, yogi-bare.co.uk

Infinity Mandala Home stretch. £84,  
gb.yogadesignlab.com

## Strike a pose

Greet the sun  
with a colourful  
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Mindful Garden Dig deep.  
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tsunamis and drought and earthquakes, and the place of fruit trees and harvests and clean air to breathe and fresh water to drink. And that in turn leads me to think about our blue ball spinning in space – how incredible the Earth seems, how we can't seem to keep that in mind as we blunder through history. And all these thoughts are what I mean when I say I have forgotten myself.

But I also remember myself. My grandfather was born in Edinburgh Castle in the barracks, the son of an officer in the British Army. His mother, Jesse, my great grandmother, was later committed to the Edinburgh insane asylum 17 miles away at Bangour Village Hospital. The place is eerie – terrifying to the modern eye – with foreboding gothic buildings loosely copied from the Alt-Scherbitz asylum in Germany. Some “patients” were kept here against their will. There were “treatments”, such as electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomy. I think about Jesse when people talk of their mental health. And here, too, is where questions of identity start to germinate.

## Walking in the Isles offers me a feeling of renewed awareness

My great-grandfather had affairs. One such affair was with a woman, a ballet dancer, originally from Sochi in Georgia – at

that time in the Soviet Union. My mother believes this woman may have been her birth mother. But her “real” mother, my grandmother, was an Indian woman born in Hyderabad who met my grandfather during the war. She changed her surname to Begum and they eloped. And this is only my mother's side of the story. For my father's side, I must go back to Europe – another war, another exile, another beginning.

**Only recently did** I realise how the Western Isles work on me. Their secret is simple. The landscape is a time machine. I am walking in the ancient world and the world that is yet to come. Nothing that I think or feel has been nullified or even changed by being here. Rather, it is that my capacity to acknowledge – to encompass – seems somehow to have been widened or deepened. As if, by entering the time machine, my perspective is momentarily stretched to millions of years. So that, even when it snaps back and contracts, it does not shrink quite as tight and constraining as it was before.

Up on the Black Cuillin ridge, I can see many of the isles of the Inner Hebrides to the south and away to the east Ben Nevis. My perspective widens again. The final climb to the jagged peaks – Sgùrr nan Gilleann and Am Basteir (The Executioner) – at this end of the ridge are too dangerous to complete alone. So, instead, I sit. I make some notes. In time, these notes become a passage in the children's book that I am co-writing in which the two protagonists must climb a mountain through a blizzard away from whatever is tracking them until they can break clear above the storm on the ridge and face their pursuer. And making these notes pulls me back into the world below.

I'm ready to return to my life – to my children, my family, my friends and all the people who I love. ■

Edward Docx's children's book *Swift and Hawk: Cyberspies* is published by Walker Books at £7.99. Buy it from [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com) for £7.43

## Séamas O'Reilly

Two children,  
one night to  
survive as a solo  
parent... What  
could possibly  
go wrong?

🐦 @shockproofbeats



For the past few weeks, we've been trying to get our little cherub to drink formula so her mum can have a bit more freedom. The first few weeks were calamitous, as our doughy poppet seemed utterly repelled by the thought of latching on to anything that wasn't anatomically connected to someone. She interpreted our first offerings of formula as, 'Here is some poison for you to drink.' Now, she gives us the annoyed, but indulging, response one typically gets from the words, 'Is Pepsi OK?'. My daughter's attitude to me is generally similar. I adore her, but she thinks me merely pleasant, holding me in the strained ambivalence my wife has for the people who do holiday cover for Radio 2 presenters.

My baby doesn't get many detailed mentions in this column, partly because she seems like a bit of a hater, and I refuse to engage with those. But mostly because her most recent milestones are ones I've

covered in lavish detail when my son went through them. So please be contented that she has begun smiling and laughing and teething and can, almost but not quite, sit up. But as we near the end of the 'just keeping her alive' stage – which I promise does not mean we will cease trying to keep her alive – we have begun to spy a new phase on the horizon.

So, today is the first time I've been left to try and sustain her with my manly charms and frequent bottle use for 24 hours, as my wife goes off to my sister's hen under strict instructions not to text me anxious notes about my progress, since I'll only tell her everything's fine, no matter what. All's going well, but it feels redundant to say that parenting a five-month-old and a four-year-old simultaneously is challenging and that I'm enormously lucky that neither my wife nor I have to do so by ourselves very often. I try to maintain this perspective as my daughter decides she doesn't want to feed, at exactly the same time my son begins

screaming because he has some orange juice on his hand. It is 8.05am.

Eventually, my son's hand is cleaned and a brisk 40-minute walk lulls the baby to sleep. Over the next few hours, I receive a steady trickle of texts from family and friends who did not get my No Texts injunction, worried that I'm looking after a baby who's not fully into bottle-feeding – or me. I consider writing back a sniffy reply to the effect that I am a father of two who is more than capable of wrangling his children by himself. I don't do this as my left hand is holding a screaming baby and my right is on my phone, researching those padded shirts with fake breasts that dads can wear.

There is more walking, more wailing, more reluctant feeding and I finally get both down by 8pm. My phone buzzes, no doubt their mum texting to see if everything is going OK. Her message just says she's getting ribbed for wearing white to a hen do. Honestly, would it kill her to ask how I'm getting on?

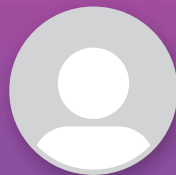




Hey hun...



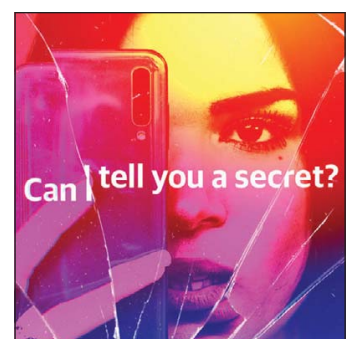
Can I tell you a secret?



## It starts the same way ...

... A seemingly innocent message from someone who appears to be a young woman: **'Can I tell you a secret?'** But as this six-part investigative podcast explores, people are rarely their true selves online - and one man took it much further. Obsession, fear, and ruined lives. What happened when this cyberstalker wreaked havoc online for over a decade? And why did he do it? All episodes available now.

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# Ask Philippa

I can't come out to my conservative family. I feel so lonely



@Philippa\_Perry



## Sunday with...

Presenter Vernon Kay on paintball, pubs and the NFL

**Are you up early?** I like a lie-in, but anything after 10am is excessive.

**Sunday breakfast?** We like to go for brunches. Not for Tess [Daly, Kay's wife], though. She'll always have a veggie sausage.

**Family activities?** It usually involves our two dogs. We have cattle in the farm next to us, too, so we check on them, then maybe head for a pub lunch with friends.

**What are you eating?** If I've had a big breakfast, I'll go for the chicken, or else it's pork with all the trimmings. Don't leave anything in the kitchen, bring it all out.

**Sunday housework?** I keep it tidy on a Sunday. After college I couldn't find a job, so I deep-cleaned schools and covered for caretakers who were sick.

**Sunday afternoon?** I've got a ridiculous number of stupid hobbies. I fly radio-controlled aeroplanes. I like a bit of paintball.

Never let age throw you in the shade when it comes to extracurricular activity.

**Room for Sunday dinner?** Tess makes a killer sandwich with big slices of whatever trendy bread's going and loads it with fillings.

**Sunday relax?** When the NFL season starts, I'm a big fantasy football player, so I'm glued to Sky or my iPad. It's been the foundation of many a debate. Tess is like: 'Please just turn it off for 10 minutes' – but anything can happen in 10 minutes.

**Sundays growing up?** Just the dread of going back to school. Sunday nights were all about *The Wonder Years*, then NFL.

**Last thing before bed?** Ablutions! I clean my teeth four times a day – I'm obsessive. If I can't fall asleep, I play 18 holes around my favourite golf course in my head, and I'm done. **Rich Pelley**

*Vernon Kay's Dance Sounds of the 90s is available on Back to Back Sounds: Radio 2 90s on BBC Sounds and Radio 2*



**The question** I am a gay man in my early 30s. I have a good job, great friends and I am in good health. My only problem is that I am deeply closeted. No one in my life knows this. My friends and family, though supportive and loving, hold entrenched conservative views, including an antipathy to homosexuality. I don't want to let them down and I can never come out to them for fear of rejection. I witnessed first-hand what rejection can do to people when a colleague came out to his conservative family. They rejected him and he sadly then took his own life.

Since my early 20s, my family have incessantly been asking me when I will get married and have children. I now no longer attend family gatherings to avoid relatives enquiring about my love life.

I have not embraced – for want of a better description – “the gay lifestyle”. I do not go clubbing, nor attend any gay-related activities, such as Pride, nor have I had one-night stands. This is partly to keep my sexuality hidden, but also because such things do not generally interest me. As such, I have become profoundly lonely. I have no one else to turn to who understands my predicament.

**Philippa's answer** After I read your email I thought of those brave North Koreans who agonise over leaving their beloved families (who continue to believe in the cult of the Kim dynasty) to escape to a new life in a more liberal country. It sounds like an extreme analogy, but I make it deliberately. It must be so very hard for them – and this is hard for you.

We must all “come of age”. Whether this means standing up to our parents or any other myriad of ways we become ourselves, it requires courage and risk. There is a build-up of pressure towards coming out to a point where it becomes unbearable to not be oneself. Then the inevitable gravity causes the scales to clunk and that tipping point is reached. It sounds like that moment may be approaching for you.

I'm worried that the pressure is hard for you to bear, which I feel you express in a disguised way when you talk of the suicide of your colleague. We never really know the reasons people end their lives, but it is frequently exacerbated by the build-up of pressure

from not expressing our feelings. I'm worried about your loneliness and although coming out appears to be unthinkable, you need a place to explore how you are feeling. As starting points try pinktherapy.com and lgbt.foundation/comingout. Having to choose between your family of origin or finding a new place to belong is one faced by many gay people and is part of the broad church that binds the gay community together.

So many people would advise you to reject before you are rejected, to say, to hell with them if they won't understand and love you as you are, but if it was that simple, you would have already done it. So far you have chosen to compromise yourself rather than be yourself. I can understand – bonds are precious. A sense of kinship is invaluable. You love your family and old friends even though they may not understand that one's sexuality is not a choice and

not a crime. I imagine you share nearly all their values. Look inside yourself to make sure you are not unconsciously sharing their aversion to gay people. Thinking about your colleague, I'm wondering whether there is a possibility that the rejection by his family was not the only factor that caused this tragedy, but his rejection of himself? There is a reason that Pride is called that. Pride is the opposite of shame and for too long gay people have been persecuted and made to feel ashamed of who they are.

At the moment you feel obliged to live a secret or celibate life. If you wanted to come out, but not to your immediate circle, there would be plenty of people to welcome you. There are more choices than just a rigid conservative culture or being outrageously camp. You don't need to go clubbing, but could join a gay sports club or a gay political or religious association. Whether you come out to your own community or not, it is important you practise becoming comfortable with being your authentic self with others to address your loneliness.

As you are withdrawing from family occasions and have never shown interest in women, your family may suspect something already. You may feel that because they have given you so much support and love you are letting them down. It is their belief system that lets them down, not you. Were you to share with them who you are, you would not only be taking your rightful place in society but also giving them an opportunity to grow. I applaud your courage in writing to me. Allowing me to share your email will be helping others in similar situations feel less alone. ■

*If you have been affected by issues mentioned in this column, call the Samaritans for free on 116 123, or at samaritans.org*

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



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