

Naked Swimming

**AND FIVE OTHER THINGS YOU
SHOULD HAVE TRIED BY NOW...**

Notice how you can be firmly ensconced in adulthood, yet have managed to avoid some significant rites of passage? We challenged these '40-year-old virgins' to redress the balance

Photographs Suki Dhanda



SKINNY DIPPING

by Esther Walker

I assume that I have only been such a prude since having my two children. Before then, in my reimagining of my former self, I was unashamed about flinging off my clothes. I was scandalous. But it's all lies. I have always been overzealous in shielding my body from prying eyes. Not that they'd want to look, but I didn't want them to catch sight and think, 'Oh my God!' At what, I didn't know. I didn't want to find out.

For instance, there was the time at the baths in Iceland, aged 18, when I refused to take off my swimming costume to shower and was shouted at by the shower-room attendant. Then, when I was about 23 and on holiday with a boyfriend and some friends in France (I forget where), everyone else ran to the beach naked and dived into the sea at midnight, while I waited for them, fully clothed. It was miserable.

I've been half skinny-dipping before - in a private pool, with just my husband there, I swam topless and it was joyfully freeing. No nagging tug of bikini band on the neck, no pull of hateful, soggy material around the chest, just silky water all around. But I have never gone all-out, fully stripped, taken-it-all-off naked. And maybe that's what's missing from my life.

Since having my first child four years ago, I have completely failed to attend to my mental wellbeing. I either work, or I'm with my kids, or I cook. That's it. I do no exercise. I don't meditate. If I have time to myself I go and have a poke around the shops or sit and make lists. My husband despairs.

When skinny-dipping entered my head, the ladies' swimming ponds on Hampstead Heath called to me. But it was summer and they were packed - I couldn't possibly swim naked there! 'No,' said my friend Nicky, 'go when it's shut and jump over the fence!' Night-time's too dark and scary. The ponds open at 7am, so I arrived at 5.30am one mid-July morning.

It was so beautiful. The path through the trees crunched beneath my feet. I already had on my sensible swimsuit under my clothes. The birds were singing and I was half asleep, but the pond was waiting. 'Jump over!' whispered the fence. I did.

Quickly I left my bag, pulled off my dress and walked down the steps. The chilly water gripped me by the ankles. Cold! Get in, get moving and warm up! The idea that there were things lurking below had always prevented me doing this. I stayed near the surface and tried to calm down, establishing there were no sharks in this part of north London. Then I peeled off my costume under the water and started to giggle. I don't know why - it just felt absurd. After a few minutes I put the bottom half of my suit back on. Being topless was wonderful - being totally naked still felt too strange, too exposing, too frightening.

My limbs were tired and I'd floated a bit too far from the swimming platform, so I climbed out and sat on the deck in my costume and took in the trees and the rippling water. A little blue tit landed near me and put its head on one side, as if to say, 'Better, now?' A gang of swallows screamed and swooped overhead. It was going to be a beautiful day. >>

Esther Walker bares all
in Hampstead ponds



CHATTING UP A STRANGER

by Marianne Power

It was a packed train and he was standing right next to me - a tall, tired-looking guy in a dark suit and brown shoes with pale skin, dark hair and blue eyes - and I fancied him. I knew he wouldn't be interested: I'm too fat, too ginger, too scruffy. I don't need men to reject me, I do it myself all the time. It's no wonder I'm single.

Over the years, I've tried meeting men in many ways. In my twenties I used the traditional approach - getting drunk in the hope that I'd magically collide with Mr Perfect by the bar. It didn't work. Then, in my thirties, I tried online dating, which resulted in lots of lacklustre meetings with sweet but unsuitable men. This summer I even tried doggie dating - where you and your mutt turn up at the park and walk around with other singletons with dogs. I don't even have a dog, I borrowed one. No luck.

But as I'm approaching 40, there's one thing I've never tried: going up to an attractive man and talking to him. I know, radical. So I decided to

chat up an attractive stranger on the Tube. My heart was pounding, I tried to think of something to say. Instead of something witty, I asked him if the train was always this crowded. He looked up from his phone, said 'yes' and looked back down again.

My heart beat even faster, but I wasn't going to back down. I waited a minute before asking, 'Where do you live?' Despite being busy, the carriage was suddenly quiet and a few people looked up and smirked. I winced. Mr Tired-In-A-Suit looked a bit alarmed and said, 'Er, Streatham.'

'Is it nice?' I asked. I could see he was torn between not wanting to be rude and worrying I was a nutter. He kept it short and sweet. 'Yes, WE like it very much.' Emphasis on the 'WE'.

Message received: girlfriend in tow. I carried on smiling and chatting, just to show that my world hadn't ended and we chatted until he got off.

And that was it: romantic failure, but I didn't care. I was too busy celebrating being a total hero.

URBAN CYCLING

by Sarfraz Manzoor

Why would anyone want to cycle in the city? I had a Raleigh Grifter when I was a teenager in Luton and enjoyed riding through the backstreets of my hometown. But that was back in the 1980s and I haven't ridden a bike since. The reason, I suspect, is fear. I didn't learn to drive because I find cars a bit scary, so being on a bike around cars seems foolhardy. I enjoy my life too much to risk it by cycling on a road clogged with murderous taxis, trucks and buses. My wife, however, is an avid cyclist and says I am missing out, and it's true. My daughter has a little balance bike and rides on the back of my wife's bike, making me the only one who doesn't cycle.

So I've signed up for a cycle-training lesson to see if I can become a cycle convert. David, my instructor, is waiting for me at my local park. He's taught thousands of people and when I explain my reasons for not cycling - a love of life and a fear of being flattened by an HGV - he nods patiently and trots out (unlikely) statistics that suggest cycling is safer than walking.

David asks me what my aim is with this class. I say I would like to be able to imagine myself as a cyclist. 'That's quite a metaphysical aim,' he says, disappointedly. 'Why not just say you want to become a cyclist?' I reply, 'I'm not sure I do.'

We agree on a short-term aim: to cycle to the British Library, where I work and which I normally reach by Tube. David teaches me how to get on the bike, assesses my steering and shows me how to make an emergency stop. After two decades of not riding a bike, pedalling in the park is fine and even fun.

David then says we need to head to some actual roads. He chooses quiet streets, but cycling on them is still stressful; my wrists ache because I am gripping the handlebars so hard. 'Remember that inside all these cars are people,' David says as we ride, 'and they don't want to hurt you.' I'm not convinced, but I like his advice about looking in the faces of the drivers - it might guilt-trip them into not killing me. I am nervous, but the more I ride, the more I enjoy it. On a bike I see my neighbourhood anew - I had no idea there was a park near the Tube or so many roads with cycle paths.

I feel myself relaxing and then, amazingly, I find myself at the British Library. The journey has taken around 20 minutes and I never felt like I was in danger. David suggests that for the journey back we tackle the fearsome Euston Road. The road is teeming with traffic; I want to say no, but I also want to say yes. I start riding. I tell myself I have as much right to be on that road as anyone else. There is a double-decker bus behind me. Breathing deeply, I tell myself not to freak out. David had taught me to stay in the middle of the lane so the driver can see me more easily. There are black cabs swarming around me. I am staying focused. A taxi driver toots his horn angrily. I look him in the face. I turn off the Euston Road and cycle through some less frantic roads before returning to the park where I'd started. I have cycled 10 miles, and muscles that I didn't know I possessed ache. I feel proud and surprised at what I have done. That evening, my wife asks if I would consider getting a bike. 'Maybe,' I reply. >>

COOKING FOR A DINNER PARTY

by Emma Laurence



It's not that I can't cook. Or that I won't. It's just that I don't. Some people say they find it relaxing; others, terrifying. Me, I've always been indifferent. Growing up, my dad did the cooking, so it never occurred to me that, as a girl, cooking was something I was supposed to do, let alone do for pleasure. Living alone I managed fine, but still cooking was a means to an end, and not something I ever wanted to do for anybody else.

I can tell you the last time I *did* cook a meal: March 17th 2012 - the first time my now fiancé, Sean, came round to mine. Suddenly I did want to do it for somebody else - if only to impress on him the full gamut of my girlfriend potential. It worked, but since that night, all culinary responsibility above buttering toast has fallen squarely under Sean's remit. He is an exceptional cook, who pours love into every dish. I'm the sort of person who cooks chicken for people who don't eat chicken and burns the bread (more on that later). Next to him I now feel inadequate, as well as indifferent.

So when I was tasked with not just cooking, but cooking for *six whole people*, I immediately envisaged the end result looking not unlike Bridget Jones' blue soup and orange pudding. My first error presented itself the day before the dinner party, when it occurred to me that one guest doesn't eat chicken. I'd decided to make

Mary Berry's Swiss chicken, spinach and mushroom bake - chicken being the key component - and Ocado was already on its way. Dessert would make up for it, I ventured: Mary's Treacle and pecan tart.

My second error came almost immediately after the actual cooking bit had begun. Mary's first rule is to always read the recipe (which, in my defence, I really definitely did). Step one: 'Put the flour, butter and icing sugar in a food processor,' Mary said. 'Sean, where's the food processor?' I asked. 'We haven't got one.' Oh...

Putting aside the inevitably doomed nature of the hand-processed pastry, I rather enjoyed making my tart. It was all so satisfyingly specific. It even looked like the one in the picture. When it came to making the main course, however, it's fair to say I came unstuck. Much like my make-up, which had slid clean off my face by the time my guests arrived. So. Many. Steps. And all of them OVERLAPPING, requiring a level of multitasking I simply do not possess. At least I'd decided against the added pressure of a starter, I thought, opting instead for the fanciest-looking French stick I could find, which I then proceeded to cremate.

But despite finding the whole experience hilarious, my guests were in agreement: I had done a good job, *especially* with the tart. Not a hint of a soggy bottom - Mary would've been proud. The poultry refusenik didn't even mention the chicken, she enjoyed the rest of it so much.

So I surprised myself, sure, but that doesn't mean I'll be donning my (specially purchased) pinny again any time soon. I'm definitely better off front of house, keeping guests topped up with drinks and entertained with tales of my general incompetence. Although next time, I just might be tempted to do dessert. In advance, and with the proper equipment.



GETTING DRUNK AT LUNCHTIME

by Emma Freud

I'm a lightweight with alcohol... and though I'm happy to push the boat out at night, I've always avoided it in the day, for fear of humiliation. Up until today, the closest I'd got to lunchtime drinking was when I was 'Best Woman' at my cousin Esther's wedding. Overjoyed that my beloved relative was marrying the most handsome man in Britain and nervous about my impending speech, I toasted the gorgeous couple at 4pm with champagne and continued via several cocktails 'til I discovered the delicious wine they were serving with dinner. By the time I stood up to make my speech at 9pm, I was so pickled that I spent 10 minutes telling 150 people how insanely, almost illegally attractive the groom was and what a very, very, very lucky girl my cousin was. I woke up the next morning in my clothes having been put to bed by my nine-year-old daughter. Apparently, there had been a band. And dancing. And a cake.

Getting drunk in the daytime when you have four children turns out to be a women's rights thing. The feminist blogger Glosswitch recently argued that society believes 'mothers should not be weak - they exist to absorb the weaknesses of others - so human frailty cannot be part of the motherhood story'. Bryony Gordon in *The Telegraph* pointed out, 'If mums do ever lose themselves in the >>

bottle, they are expected to do it furtively - a quick bowl of Sauvignon after the kids are asleep.'

There are two extremes here - either you are teetotal Mother Earth, or you're a desperate housewife hiding gin behind the granola. As a mother of four, surely it is time to stand up for the freedom of a mother to live her life as she wishes, even if it leaves her flaws on full display? So I decide to get drunk with a girlfriend as a political statement and also because I have just bought some of that rosé wine made by Brangelina, which looks delicious. And today is the perfect opportunity - I've arranged for my 10-year-old son, Spike, to play with his next-door neighbour for the afternoon. 'But I went there yesterday,' he says. I reply, 'I know, and he liked it so much that he wants you to go back. For *ages* this time.' And there was the first warning bell - I'd lied to my son for the sake of some alcohol.

The subsequent boozy lunch in the garden with a girlfriend feels heady, irresponsible, carefree and youthful - even though we have seven children between us and our collective age is 105.

Glass 1. Mmm, crisp, floral, nice bouquet. Well done, Brad - and yes, my friend knows about wine because she has drunk a lot of it over the years, so that's a true compliment, actually.

Glass 2. Start talking about other friends of ours who drink too much, which leads us on to a frenzy of trash-talking. I am not proud of this bit.

Glass 3. Long discussion about how much we love our children, including, and particularly, Spike's guinea pigs. Find some confiscated sweets and neck them.

Glass 4. Bit sweaty and blathering about being under-appreciated by everyone, including ourselves. We move from the garden table and sprawl on the grass amid the sweet wrappers. We should stop, but it's for an article, so we open another bottle. This isn't decadence, it's being committed to a journalistic project. Did I mention how much I truly relish and appreciate the virtues of my guinea pigs?

And I don't remember much after that... had the stars been out, it would have been declared a fabulous belter of a night. But by day, had anyone seen us lying on our backs, slurring our words and over-emoting, we just looked tragic. Even mothers deserve the right to choose a drunken lunch - but the annoying part of my temporary one-woman feminism movement is that I didn't like it. I talked bollocks, had a headache for the rest of the day and hated lying to my son. I do want my children to see me live a full, complex, messy life, but I would rather it involved dancing *really* badly at parties, than trying to justify daytime drinking.

At 6pm I am woken by two huge, confused eyes gazing into my dry, squinting, bloodshot ones. 'Mum,' says Spike, 'why are you in bed?' I lie (again), 'Oh, I didn't sleep well last night, so I had a little nap.' 'It's nearly supper!' he exclaims. 'I know,' I groan, 'how do you feel about a double espresso with a bacon sandwich and do you know how to make it?'



BARTERING

by Isy Suttie

I'm not sure how, but I've reached adulthood without bartering. It just doesn't feel right. I'll pay 20 quid for knock-off sunglasses in Alicante and even paid the asking price for my flat. I've got a terribly British attitude to it - I'd rather pay over the odds than risk upsetting anyone. But we should test ourselves, so I headed to an auction.

As I walked round the viewing, I worried about how to bid. What if I scratched my nose and it was mistaken for a bid? I decided to ask: 'Put your number in the air,' advised a lady official, nodding at the card I'd been given. 'If you want to continue, keep it up or nod at the auctioneer.' Just nod at him! It was like a secret sign. I'd had a look online beforehand and chosen lot 24: five ceramic tiles, one Dutch and from the 17th century.

Once the auction began, I got very excited. There were around 15 of us in the room, plus - competition I hadn't anticipated - people bidding online

and on the phone. Some things didn't sell, but some went for thousands. When we got to the tiles, my number was up before the description was read. The auctioneer gave me a nod and said, 'Sixty in the room.' Hooray! I put my number down. That was easy. But no! The internet lady said, 'Sixty-five on the net.' Heart in my mouth, I whizzed my number back up and kept it there. In no time, the price had soared to over £100; just me and this internet bidder remained. 'My hand's stuck in the air!' I thought. 'It'll never end! What if I have to remortgage my flat?' Then I heard the hammer bang. 'Sold! For £120.' I was shaking. 'Was it to me?' I asked.

Afterwards, as I recovered in the café with a bacon sarnie, I reflected on my win. I'd bartered! I'll never know if I would have kept my hand up forever. Ah well, I'd challenged myself enough for one morning. Maybe I really have grown up... 

STYLING: JEMIMA BRADLEY; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: NATACHA SCHMITT; SPECIAL THANKS TO ROSEBERY'S FINE ART AND ANTIQUES AUCTION HOUSE; ROSEBERY'S.CO.UK; ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS CAMERA PRESS