



LEGAL HIGHS

# Emma Freud's legal highs: guinea pigs

Emma Freud | Saturday November 06 2021, 12.01am, The Times

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We all went a little insane during lockdown. That's right, isn't it? It wasn't just me? Everyone did what they had to do to get through the weirdness. And my therapy of choice was to drown in small fluffy creatures.

There's plenty of scientific research about the benefits of creatures. Playing with a pet can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine. Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels. And heart-attack patients with pets survive longer than those without. Even watching animal videos causes a decrease in cortisol production and a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure. Ergo, in trying to do the right thing, at the height of Lockdown Three, the animal count in my house rose to 21 (not including my children). We were a small petting zoo of dogs, cats, kittens, chickens, ducks, ducklings, a tortoise and a hedgehog. A lot, I know. But it was better than baking banana bread.

So imagine my excitement when I spotted in our local newspaper an ad announcing: "Wednesday - guinea pig auction." I had found my perfect moment in which I would get not only a new lockdown companion, but a multisensory purchase experience and an adrenaline rush. Who can resist the competitive rivalry and the frenzied price escalation, the time pressure that overrides rational thought and makes us want to win at any cost? (Which is why wealthy bidders often send delegates: to pre-empt overbidding in the giddy excitement.) I was in.



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Four days later I arrived at a scruffy old barn on a rural farm in the deep heart of Suffolk to see an elderly farmer in ancient dungarees and an even older hat sitting on a small chair balanced on the top rung of a metal shelving unit, surrounded by cardboard boxes of guinea pigs. I've lived in Suffolk all my life and thought I was fully on top of the accent here, but listening to this elderly auctioneer raising the prices of a barnful of tiny pigs was as accessible as an advanced dialect of Martian. I have no idea if the pets went for pennies, pounds or small fortunes. I bid like crazy. But because I never managed to raise my hand at the right moment, I ended up with nothing (although I'm told I almost bought a tractor).

But the joy on the faces of the smarter bidders made it clear that if you add together the mood-enhancing benefits of retail therapy, the dopamine glow of pet ownership and the adrenaline rush of live bidding, you end up with the triple-whammy legal high. Available - irregularly - at Suffolk's only guinea pig auction house.

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