

The joy of ageing

Emma Freud on the pleasures of maturity, including chatting to birds and the perfect cheese toastie



MATT FROST

Emma Freud

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There are certain aspects of ageing that I find enchanting: the well-documented state of giving fewer f***s about the big things, which often seems to coincide with giving more f***s about various little things. These are my present, random, top three ...

For decades I was convinced that the dum-ti-dum theme tune of *The Archers* communicated only one sad thing: “Youngsters be gone, this programme is for older folk to help while away the hours between breakfast porridge, and bedtime cocoa.” Now, suddenly, it’s the highlight of my day. Thirteen minutes of pure, private radio joy — beautifully scheduled at 7pm to coincide with the opening of a cold beer. I relish the gloriously uneventful storylines of farming dilemmas and staffing problems in the tearoom, punctuated by precious periods of high drama involving repentant alcoholics, lusty teens and tragic miscarriages (of both justice and babies). Its plots are as varied as the seasons, its humour is rare, its regularity is grounding. I had no idea something so old-ish could make me so happy-ish, and find myself resentful there is no episode on Saturday nights — presumably because the BBC assumes its audience is out at a rave. I’m not. I’m at home yearning for updates on my Ambridge companions.

On the subject of birds, I thought I was dead below the waist: no interest whatsoever and yawning if anyone brought up the subject. So I’m shaken to discover there is sweet pleasure to be had from birdsong — thanks to an app called Merlin. It’s so simple that even my 97-year-old mum, who answers a FaceTime call by showing me her ear, could work out how to use it.

Step outside, turn it on and it will tell you the name of any bird in your earshot. According to Merlin, my garden is housing robins, blackbirds, wood pigeons, jackdaws and goldfinches. And every time one of them sings, the relevant bird photo on the app flashes, so within minutes you can identify which of the birds is chatting at you. Staying at a Sussex hotel recently I woke up to what turned out to be a nightingale performing its greatest hits. On holiday in Switzerland we heard a yapping sound — behold the courting call of the bearded vulture. And in the trees in front of our local Tube station there turns out to be a gang of parakeets having a seemingly endless party. It’s a bit like the first time you snorkel on holiday and discover that what you thought was just plain water in fact contains a thousand fishes. I will never buy binoculars, and (tbh) may never speak of this revelation again, but it’s joyful to tune into the bird jamborees going on in every tree, everywhere, all at once.

And finally ... being leisurely. Last week I saw a recipe for a croque monsieur. It didn’t call for regular gruyère cheese, it requested gruyère that had been matured for at least 12 months. It asked not for ham, but for Prince de Paris ham, to sit between two slices of pain de mie smeared with Maille Fins Gourmets mustard.

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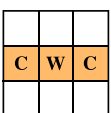
I had no children to pick up (they’ve left home), and a less pressing schedule as befits someone who’s been around the block a thousand times, so I decided to make the creation of this dish the mission of my entire day. I cycled to Panzer’s deli in St John’s Wood, which stocked the exact moist French ham the recipe demanded, and had a cracking chat with the butcher about the ethics with which it had been produced. I meandered down to London’s best-smelling independent French bakery in Warren Street, where the pain de mie was still warm, then picked up some raw butter and headed off to a fromagerie in Moxon Street which has a spectacular cold room. After tasting and discussing six of their finest offerings, I shunned the younger, fresher cheeses and purchased a pound of their oldest gruyère — a deeper, wiser, battle-scarred but still rewarding item. A bit like me.

The solo culinary tour was the best day of my week, the chats with the artisan shopkeepers was an education, and the sandwich itself was breathtaking — oozing, deeply flavoured and real. None of this would have been easy a decade ago, with four kids, a Red Nose Day to produce, and always a new film on the go. But on that random Tuesday I was able to put my zeal into a day cycling around town for no other reason than the pursuit of the perfect cheese toastie. I love being 62.

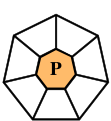
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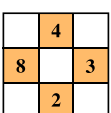
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