

# “At 48 I feel HAPPY and buoyant and sorted”



Columnist and author India Knight talks to Victoria Young about how to divorce amicably, avoiding mutton and her new book about being in your prime

**India, 48, is a columnist for *The Sunday Times* and *In Your Prime: Older, Wiser, Happier* is her new book. She lives in London with her partner, MP Eric Joyce. She has three children, Oscar 22, Archie 19, and Nell, 10.**

**I always write books I feel like reading and with my girlfriends in mind.** Recently I've noticed that all we talk about when we've had a drink is the menopause. We're all well-educated, well-informed women and we all know nothing about it at all, and I started thinking how odd that was. The menopause is the last taboo and is only ever discussed as the death of fertility, and therefore of sexiness or desirability. But the idea that it's all over when you're menopausal is just a myth.

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**But also, I'm about to be 49 and don't feel 49 at all.** My only points of comparison are my mother or grandmother and I feel in a completely different place from them. I feel good, and happy and buoyant and pleased with things. I feel quite sorted. And, rather than look at the last third of our life with anxiety and fear, I wanted to celebrate all the good things about it. But I also wanted

to write something useful because there are lots of complications and pitfalls that need to be addressed.

### ON FAMILY LIFE

**Mine is quite complicated, although very straightforward to me.** I live with my partner, Eric Joyce, and two of my three children. Archie is doing A levels and Nell is at primary school. Oscar, who is 22, has just started Oxford Brookes University – rather late – studying politics. I love him very dearly but I'm quite pleased that he is finally going; he's old enough to have graduated and come back!

**I really like that we live in a big house, with lots of people in and out.** That includes the boys' dad and my daughter's dad, who are not the same person, and Eric's twin girls who

are 13, and who ricochet back and forth. My kids feel delighted about that, particularly Nell, who has a big age gap between her and her brothers. Eric's twins are very sweet and patient with her because she's quite giddy towards them, being big girls.

**Families remain families – even if you go on to have other families with**

**other people.** It's incredibly important to bear that in mind when there's a separation and it's vital to shield children as much as you can. I – and the children's fathers – went out of our way to keep things civil even when that wasn't an appealing prospect in the early days. It wasn't always easy, but the notion that one partner in a divorce is blameless and the other guilty is really counterproductive: it always takes two.

**I'm a displeaser rather than a pleaser.** I think it's because my mother had me when she was 17 and so really a child herself. My father and she separated when I was two and we joggled along, learning at the same pace. So I didn't feel that I had to please my mother particularly. And my father seemed very pleased with me as I was: I never had the sense that he'd have been more pleased if I were different. We moved to London from Brussels when I was nine. And my stepfather, who to this day I love very dearly, didn't try to parent me. So I just felt that, provided I wasn't monstrously selfish then it was fine – which was a liberation, really.

### LIFE AFTER DIVORCE

**Happily, I've never been with anybody who – to my knowledge – had an affair.** But I've watched the marriages of many people I've cared about completely destroyed by what has been on occasion, a mad loss of judgment. I'm not talking about accommodating mistresses – I'm talking about a random one night stand on a business trip; the idea that something that's just a blip can break a 20-year marriage with three children in it seems a bit over the top.

**My outlook towards relationships these days is extremely sunny.** I am idyllically happy. And that's the other thing about being in your prime – it's possible to meet the love of your life well into middle age. I may not have if, after I'd split from my daughter's father I'd just sat in a darkened room wailing. I did that for a bit and then I thought "That's enough moping". Time does heal and things do become less sad and you start feeling more cheerful.

**Eric and I met four years ago because of a shared interest in the Congo.** He chaired an all-party parliamentary group on the great lakes region of Africa and, being

Belgian, I am interested in the Congo. We spoke for about 10 minutes and that was that. There was a brief union and there was a parting of the ways for a while – and then we reconvened. I had a pretty good inkling the first time around. But the second coming together was categorical.

**The beauty of dating in your prime is that you care much less about the niceties.** There's no observing any archaic dating rituals or staring at the phone fretting about "what does this text mean?" I'm much more gung ho about it, because I have more experience, and also of course I'm not thinking who will marry me, and who will I have children with? I'm just thinking, "I want to have a nice time and perhaps this is the nice time person".

### BODY AND SOUL

**Body wise, I try and celebrate the good.** I try not to be grossly obese and try and walk a bit. I really don't want to be 50 years old and hating my body that has served me well and produced three children although it doesn't mean that there are no moments of self doubt,

**I really like eating.** Some people may not be particularly interested in food and that's fine, but I really like pleasure, and food is pleasure three times a day.

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**I first had Botox eight years ago because my relationship was breaking up and I felt terrible.** It was unnecessary, and probably psychological but it made me feel much more cheerful. Then I had too much. My eyebrows went too pointy and I looked constantly surprised. I looked in the mirror and I thought I'm starting to look slightly odd. So I had nothing for four years. But then I developed a big crease in my forehead so now I have Botox twice a year, which is all you need.

**For women in their prime, a decent hair cut and colour is important.** And so is depilation. Other than that I think less is more. I love the transformative powers of make up but too much – applied wrong – can be very ageing.

**Around the time my daughter was born, I started emoting wildly – about everything.** It's just the amazingness of

### What to wear?



**➔ To a party? A fitted dress, ideally in navy, either by Vivienne Westwood or an American brand called "Stop Staring!". There's also a good shop in Somerset called "Deadly Is The Female"; they do lots of vampy shapes but in really forgiving thick stretchy fabric that sucks you in. I'd wear it with bare legs, and a modest heel.**



**➔ Instant glamour? Really red lipstick – and nothing else. Red lipstick and a bare face has magical powers.**

**➔ If I want to look casual... which is most days, I wear a Tucker dress. My uniform is a triangular short-ish dress with tights in winter and kaftan-y, Ibiza-like clothing in the summer. Pistol boots in winter and Sea Salt sandals or Birkenstocks for summer.**

**➔ I like a really good handbag. I used to buy things willy-nilly in an impulsive way – I now try and buy investment pieces. I always have a good winter coat, sometimes from MaxMara, or my Woolrich Arctic parker which was expensive but has lasted four winters. I'm not so interested in shoes but I own very expensive tights – Wolford woolly ones with cashmere. And I like underwear that holds you up and in. M&S usually does the job very nicely.**



everything and the extraordinary weight of really small things. Eric and I were away in Cornwall recently, in a cottage all alone on a cliff with a bay. It was fantastic – but I spent half of it in tears going, "Oh my God, the sea! The seals! The ferns!"

**My style is eclectic... but mostly comfortable.** I was much more fashion conscious when I was in my thirties but >>>

## in my experience



now I can't bear feeling trussed up. I'm very against tailoring because I'm 5ft 10 and prefer feeling rounded rather than blocky. The polo neck is not my friend because I've got big boobs. And I don't like very high heels because I want to know that I could run away.

**Clothes should always make you look better and flatter you.** I like a 1950s silhouette, jersey and stretch fabric and high Lycra content. And colour and print. I love Vivienne Westwood's Anglomania range, and dresses by Tucker.

**We all know that mutton exists.** But when I tried to start to break it down in the book I got stuck after mini skirts. And mini skirts with thick woolly tights and flat shoes aren't even necessarily muttony! I think mutton is partly an outlook; a state of mind – desperately wanting to be younger than you may be.

**Women my age have a good mutton radar but fear of mutton makes women dress over-conservatively and in an elderly way.**

On balance, I'd much rather look muttony than look 70, in matching separates.

**I cope with difficult moments by being extremely sanguine and unsentimental.**

My daughter has a heart condition and when she had to have several major surgeries, I became a machine: I go into hyper-efficient mode and

want all the facts and information. It worked very well – and then afterwards you can take to your bed for two weeks because it's like donning armour, you take it off and you're all weak underneath. But having had that experience, which was literally a matter of life and death, every other annoying little thing seemed quite piddly.

**I'm naturally a very optimistic person.**

And although I'm capable of being incredibly grumpy, I'm increasingly aware that life is finite and short. There's something to be said for ignoring bad things completely, because then you don't dwell; it's the dwelling that's so awful. Lying around wringing your hands is

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not only a complete waste of time – it's really demoralising. I really believe that if you can't change a bad thing you just need to get on with it. **w&h**

## From the book

### ON EXTRA-MARITAL SEX...

✦ I know everyone thinks their partner is a paragon of virtue who would never dream of breaking his sacred wedding vows, but I'm also quite old and quite observant. It doesn't matter how much sex the man has at home (and most men in this category feel they don't have enough, even if you're constantly shagging and can barely walk). My conclusion is this: if there was a 100 per cent guarantee of not being found out – of no comeback and no consequences – most men would shag other people if they could.

### ON FASHION...

✦ Neutrals can be very ageing. The immediate effect is of something dull and uninteresting.  
✦ Blacks look absolutely awful on almost everyone. It drains you and makes you look tired.  
✦ Conversely, navy blue is universally flattering, regardless of skin tone or hair colouring.  
✦ Grey is the colour of fog, pigeons and mice.  
✦ Neutrals are about hiding. Don't hide. Why would you hide?

### ON BEAUTY...

✦ Nothing is as ageing as having rubbish teeth! This is going to sound incredibly simple but: white teeth. Whiter teeth at any rate. I'm not suggesting that you remortgage the house and go and get a mouthful of veneers but making your teeth significantly whiter, by yourself, at home, is easy. You need a top-of-the-range electric toothbrush – the Philips Sonicare range starts at £50 and used in conjunction with a safe whitening toothpaste (I recommend the Janina brand) you basically get a whole new mouth in about three weeks.

### ON THE JOY OF POTTERING...

✦ It is the joy, really, in some respects, isn't it? Lovely, lovely pottering. You can't really get down with the pottering while you still have small children; they don't allow for it. True pottering really only comes into its own in middle age, and beyond, where people can become actual pottering Olympians: pottering is one of the things that genuinely gets better and better with age, like a cheese.

*In Your Prime: Older, Wiser, Happier* by India Knight (Fig Tree)

