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OCTOBER 2019 • £4.50

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Alone at last

Having had children young, Vee Sey finds herself living on her own for the first time – and feeling bereft. Could an art therapy retreat help her start the next chapter of her life?

The sun is sinking on Saturday and I'm having a cup of tea in the garden. My lobelia plantlings are snug in their pots, new glass baubles are dangling from the freshly pruned holly tree and the windowsills are free of cobwebs. I've made butternut squash and apple soup for supper, but it's too early to eat, and my body hurts from running and yoga.

'Come on, Magic,' I say to our little black cat, 'let's put the telly on.'

Stuck in a lonely limbo

Here I am, aged 48 – too young to be old and too old to be young – on my own after waving goodbye to my precious daughter who has moved away to university, hot on the heels of my firstborn son. My heart is heavy and, when I am not exhausting myself working furiously or exercising, I feel rudderless and lonely. A bubble of sadness hovers over every day. I'm grieving but no one has died.

I became a mother at 21, having left my family home to marry my teenage love. No surprise, I craved adventure, so we

emigrated from South Africa with our five-year-old boy for uncharted shores. My daughter was born in the UK and I put down roots, which burrowed deeper and deeper as the children started school, established lives and we caught a glimpse of their shimmering futures. Proud and protective, my existence was so wrapped up in theirs, it never occurred to me that parents die, relationships end, beloved sisters, still living in Cape Town, won't be joining me for ice cream on seaside jaunts, and children... well, children grow up and leave.

When I was a younger woman, like

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my daughter is now, my ambition was to be an artist – but alas, mouths to feed, so I settled on writer, which segued into journalist, and art fell by the wayside. I have not drawn so much as a stick figure since my divorce 11 years ago, and that was the most uninspired still life you could imagine, scratched in budget pastels, which I stuck in a fancy frame as a rebellious exclamation: 'This is me – I'm still here and I don't need you, dude!'

The artist's way

Still, I am intrigued when the opportunity arises to explore this uncomfortable transition in my life through art therapy. Could this significant part of my past help me move forward? Art therapy, explain Penelope Orfanoudaki and Romny Vadoros, who run Artful Retreats over long weekends in Crete, is not about being a latent Picasso – it's about using the mindful, painstaking attention of creating art as a therapeutic process.

I set off, anxious about my lack of artistic nous. But my fears are dispelled when I meet the rest of the group in exquisite surroundings – a diverse >>>



bunch of loners, team players, older, younger, free spirits in beads and tattoos, professionals in fancy watches; chatty, quiet, open and guarded. We are all seeking something we cannot name.

'Before we had language, we used art to communicate our feelings,' says Romny. 'Art therapy is about developing a greater sense of self through creativity.' I start to relax, because that's exactly why I'm here.

The shape of me

We were given an artistic appetiser: to draw a circle, consider its shape and meaning for us, then create an image around it, for up to an hour. 'There is no right or wrong, and we'll never judge you,' says Penelope. 'And don't overthink it!' I take that last instruction seriously and, in less than 10 seconds, I draw a careless oval in black gel pen in my notebook.

'You're not allowed to judge me – but I'm not showing you what I did!' I announce at our first gathering, establishing my joker status in the group. Beneath my lax effort, I have attempted self-analysis, writing: 'Is it an emptiness, or is it an entrance to something else?' I cringe now, and refuse to share.

One of the other participants has made a charming line drawing of what appears to be an astronaut, or a diver, underwater, his head encased in that circle. That person spent the full hour on it because – I realise – they, like any of us, deserved time for self-reflection. I've been so busy caring for other people for two and a half decades, that I can't look myself in the eye. I can't even draw a circle if it means examining what I want. I decide there will be no more half-hearted scribbles in my secret book – from now on, I am going to do my fervent best.

Instinctive self-creation

Our sessions continue. We close our eyes and use both hands to emulate our breathing on paper, via the motion of our crayons and the shapes we create blind. It's a simple, hypnotic centring of the other senses. Later, we lie on massive



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sheets of paper and have the shape of our bodies traced. I joke about feeling saddened by my lack of waist but there is no time to play the clown – we have a mere 90 minutes to create an artwork with that giant form as a base. Silence and concentration settle in and we get to work. It doesn't escape me that we are exploring our perceptions of ourselves.

Naively, but intuitively, I use primary colours to tidily colour in my body, a tentative foray shackled by rules and learned behaviour. Then, I focus on my heart area and I am a little braver here, creating freer, flame-like shapes – to show depth of feeling, perhaps? Are these my unfulfilled passions? I don't have

time to be clever, only honest, and the moments are ticking by. I embellish the right hand, the tool of my trade, and outline my feet as separate entities, making a wisecrack that I can't find them.

Yet, despite my romantic view of myself as a rebel, I never draw outside the line. Why am I sticking within the expected boundaries, even here? I know this conformism is self-imposed and was necessary while I was raising my young...

Freeing the girl within

Then, the memory of an innocent me, patting mud pies out of soil and grass for my father's dinner comes to mind, and I think: 'Hello, are you my inner child?'

Our sessions are punctuated by discussion and interpretation; building trust and friendship. During morning yoga, mealtimes and excursions away from our villa on the Bleverde Estate, near the heritage village of Gavalochori, we bond over mountains of gorgeous food. Romny and I discover a shared appetite for comedic singing, just because it's fun.

Back in the studio, with each creation, we find out and reveal a little more about ourselves. Self-portraits in three colours;

collaborative paintings of each other, symbolism and metaphor emerging, and technique – or plain old enthusiasm – evolving. I stick my fingers into unctuous paints, layer crayon, pastel, ink and acrylic, and joyfully start to ignore borders – because this is self-expression, and why the hell not? As I liberate myself on paper, Penelope and Romny stand by, the kindest of guardians, guiding and observing, but never intruding.

Then, we are curators; it's exhibition time and our final piece – and any

“As I liberate myself on paper, Penelope and Romny stand by, the kindest of guardians, guiding and observing, but never intruding”

realisations or insights we'd like to share – will be discussed. The talented artist who created the underwater astronaut has painted a dishevelled person with spinning, out-of-control legs, three figures hanging from the central body like kittens with claws in its skin. It is an image of burden and chaos. We hear of younger siblings that person must provide for; a brutal responsibility in a young life.

Me before 'Mother'

I say my exhibition is closed, and everyone titters, yet there's nowhere to hide. Speaking in public brings me out in hives, but I start to explain my work, my full-body creation from before propped up on a sunbed. 'As you've probably realised,' I begin, brightly, 'I use humour to hide my feelings.' Then, out of the blue, my mask collapses, my lips tighten and I begin to cry. That coping mechanism, the joker, is gone and, in a breaking voice,

I tell my stranger friends: 'I feel abandoned. Everyone I love is gone and I'm here all alone.'

I'm shocked by my childlike language; the emotion searing between the bones of my ribcage. I didn't even understand what I was painting until I was asked to clarify it. My masterpiece, my 'revelation', is what I verbosely call a landscape of infinite dreams and possibility. I've painted a disproportionately large bird, gliding grandly over pine trees, imaginary flowers and a sea of unnaturally vivid colours. The flames of my heart are there in the background – eruptions of volcanic heat in orange and red. But it's an open, fantasy sky, with sunbeams, moons and stars under her wings... once she understands that a whole life is not summarised by releasing her chicks into the world and being terrified of being on her own. I can clearly read its message to myself.

Back home, my mind holds onto this new awareness, though it hasn't filtered entirely into my being. Creating space for my younger self to re-emerge has reminded me of who I was before motherhood – who I still am! I am not healed – as if by magic paintbrush – but I know now that my journey through this life is not over – and I can add colour, texture, contrast and meaning to it, however I choose.

The next Artful Retreat is from 1 to 4 October 2019. For more, and for 2020 dates in Crete, Switzerland and Australia, see artfulretreats.com

The joys of being a free agent

Your children may have flown the nest, so what now? Here are a few ideas on embracing the life you once knew

- **Vegetarian in a land of carnivores, or the other way around? Now, you can eat whatever you fancy.**
- **You're at liberty to watch what you want on TV.** *SpongeBob and Batman off, Psychologies 'Film of the month' and travelogues on.*
- **You know those frantic years with no time for yourself? They're over. See friends and make new ones.**
- **A heart full of love and care? Direct it towards someone deserving.** *I've volunteered at the West Kent Befriending Service for*
- lonely elderly people. There's a wonderful woman in my town who enjoys our weekly visits as much as I do.*
- **Your hobbies and dreams, remember them? Get cracking! I can't reiterate enough that art therapy is for everyone. No one need**
- see your work – you're not showing at the Tate!*
- **Get fit. You can run or walk for as long you like and go to yoga – at night.**
- **If you're single, start dating. There's no one to judge how late you get home.**