

If size 2 clothes make us anorexic, maybe XXL will make us fat

Carol Midgley



Maybe I'm being thick (no need to comment), but why is Asos, the online clothing store, being "slammed" as "irresponsible" for stocking size 2 clothes, which equate to a 22in waist? A Liberal Democrat MP and former health minister declared it "dangerous", as if the wicked vest tops and shorts came tooled up with flick knives. Some customers vowed to boycott Asos until the items were removed, while a Conservative MP said that idealising such small sizes could lead to young women developing eating disorders.

Hmm. We'll come back to that. But what about all those people who happen to be size 2? Are we saying that they shouldn't be allowed clothing? That providing apparel for them is too damn risky? Surely it's more irresponsible to make these poor thinies walk the streets naked, perhaps swaying alongside you in the Tube with their pubis in your face, because others might glimpse an XXS frock online and be plunged into serious mental illness. Do we want people such as slim Keira Knightley, who once successfully sued a newspaper that said she had an eating disorder and suggested she was a bad role model when she is just naturally thin like her father, to be forced to bare their arses in Asda?

I'll level with you. I doubt that the mere existence of tiny clothes can cause people to develop a complex and potentially deadly psychiatric disorder. Clothing just can't be that powerful, can it? Have you ever felt compelled to scissor out all your gussets just because crotchless knickers exist? You have? Well that's terrible. Ban crotchless pants immediately.

It strikes me that in fretting about excessive thinness we are frying the smaller fish. Let me be clear: I am NOT trivialising eating disorders, which I know are a terrible, often fatal illness. I am NOT saying advertisers don't promote an impossible standard of thinness so that women will self-loathe and buy more beauty products, because I know that they do. But this

is also the week in which an expert warned us that we are facing an "obesity apocalypse" and that teenagers should undergo weight-loss surgery such as gastric bands and stomach stapling on an unprecedented scale. Fat is a bigger foe than some shop selling extra-petite leggings.

One in three children is obese by the time they leave primary school, which is why school uniform shops have started selling trousers with 50in waists. It is the crisis that threatens to cripple the NHS. So why is no one protesting outside Marks & Spencer because it sells XXXL jumpers?

If a small dress encourages thinness, a huge one must encourage fatness — no? Of course not. No one spies a pair of XXL elasticated-waist slacks and thinks: "Pass me the Mars bars."



Equally, I have never met a person with a serious eating disorder who blamed it squarely on seeing skinny models in magazines. I won't deny that such models make many people feel bad about their bodies. But if we think feeling bad about one's body is the same as anorexia nervosa, then we oversimplify a complicated illness.

And a 22in waist didn't used to be all that rare. When I was a teenager a friend — perfectly healthy — had one. I never "caught" it off her, alas. Which is a pity. If super-skinny jeans made people thin, then all the NHS's problems could be solved in the morning by Primark.

I forecast a whole lot of hot air

The weatherman Bill Giles says that the BBC's new weather forecasts are "as disappointing as a downpour in high summer". The new

graphics highlight freezing temperatures with just a thin blue line, he writes. The UK is too small on the screen and you can see much of Europe.

Bill, mate, this is nothing compared with the meaningless chatty guff with which many presenters fill their broadcasts, clearly auditioning for a spot on

I'm a Celebrity... What does "wintriness" even mean? What is "organised rain" as opposed to a "good dollop", and will it interfere with the "ribbon of cloud"? Why do they tell you about what the weather has been like already? A person sitting in 'Tring at 6.30pm does not need to know that at 2pm in

Cold sick — do some like it hot?

Scottish Conservatives have lambasted the draft transition Brexit deal on fishing rights, with one Douglas Ross declaring that "it would be easier to get someone to drink a pint of cold sick" than sell it as a success.

Interesting. This phrase, taken from the famous playground rhyme, "Scab and matter custard green snot pie/ All mixed together with a dead dog's eye/ Slap it in a sandwich nice and thick/ Then swill it all down with a cup of cold sick", has intrigued me since childhood.

Why does the vomit being cold make it more disgusting? I'd seriously like to know. If it were still warm, would that make the sick more drinkable? You see I don't think so. Perhaps the European chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, has a view? Or maybe some university could raise funds to research this matter. Honestly? I've seen more asinine academic studies.

Stornoway it was a bit murky. It's history. Even the people in Stornoway no longer care.

Nothing will beat Carol Kirkwood describing rainfall as "wetter than an otter's pocket" (bless her innocence). That was when we reached peak forecast. And anyway — don't most people just look at their phones?

From Russia,

Jana Bakunina has been called a traitor by her Russian father for criticising the president in her new memoir. The City banker tells Mark Smith why she did it

On the eve of last Sunday's elections in her native Russia, Jana Bakunina received a series of WhatsApp messages from her father, who lives on the outskirts of Ekaterinburg, 3,000 miles away from her north London flat. Relations between Sergey Bakunin and his daughter have been fraught for years, but there was an air of finality to this latest paternal tirade. "With your education and ambitions, you could have done good for Russia yet you act against it," read one missive. "And if you are against Russia, you are against your own family."

In fact, Bakunina, who is 38 and became a British citizen ten years ago after attending Oxford University and working as a banker in the Square Mile, is on good terms with the rest of her family in Russia. Her memoir, *Bird's Milk*, is dedicated to her loyal mother, Tatiana, who once visited London to cheer her on in the London marathon. "Whatever disappointments and pain she encountered in her own life," Bakunina writes, "she resolved to help me celebrate my journey." For Sergey Bakunin, it would seem, Jana is the disappointment. His messages from Saturday excoriate her as "a traitor", urging her to "come to her senses" and to "vote to help Russia stand up to the aggressive enemy that is the West".

Standing up for Russia meant voting to keep Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin, just as fingers across Europe and America were pointing in his direction after the nerve agent attack that left former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia fighting for their lives. Bakunina is in little doubt as to who is responsible for the poisonings. She blows out her cheeks in exasperation as I try to mount alternative explanations for the sake of argument. The timing was so brazen, I offer, how can we be sure the attack wasn't an attempt by dissidents to frame Putin?

"It looks to be a provocation, doesn't it?" Bakunina replies. "You have to ask yourself who would benefit from that. It's Putin, of course. The Kremlin provoked a strong reaction from the West, then wrote the perfect pre-election narrative to spread via state-operated media back in Russia: look how aggressive Britain is... the entire West is coming together to declare war on us; we need to defend ourselves against these enemies, and we need a strong leader to do that. Vote Putin!"

Bakunina has been galvanised by the example of Alexei Navalny, the lawyer and activist whose campaign to run for president was barred by the Central Electoral Commission in December and called for a boycott of Sunday's ballot. "That guy has opened 80 regional [opposition] centres, he has roused all these people to support the

grassroots opposition movement under very challenging circumstances. That's not going to disappear overnight."

In an interview on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme last Friday she speculated about whether she might go the way of Skripal. "I received a bunch of flowers yesterday. I couldn't see who it was from," she told the reporter Sanchia Berg, "and I was thinking, 'Is that the Kremlin sending me some biological weapon?' Of course I was laughing, but there is a sense that no one is safe."

Bakunina refers to her homeland as being in the thrall of an "autocratic dictatorship", but says it wasn't always like this. "I grew up in a country that desperately wanted to become a democracy." In *Bird's Milk*, she recalls a childhood in Ekaterinburg (then known as Sverdlovsk) where the family's standard-issue Soviet apartment overlooking a motorway contrasted with the fruitful cornucopia of their rural dacha.

The book's name derives from a popular Soviet confection ("Even I am not immune to the sense of nostalgia for the Soviet Union," she says, laughing), but it also recalls a Russian proverb that warns against the elusive nature of happiness: "A rich man has everything but bird's milk."

Ironically, after the new hope of Gorbachev's perestroika and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it was Bakunina's father who set her on the path to becoming what she is today, a City high-flyer and self-described amateur anti-Putin pundit.

"He was the one that encouraged me to study in the West," says Bakunina, who as a teenager enrolled at a German boarding school with help from her father's business contacts. "He had been a rebel in his youth, refusing to join the Communist Party," Bakunina claims. "Suddenly now he is part of the system."

Her father's radical reversal in worldview is understandable, she says. A research fellow and lecturer at a Soviet polytechnic, he tried his hand at importing industrial and consumer goods from Germany during the 1990s, but was thwarted by what Bakunina calls "the rigid bureaucracy and backwardness of the Russian trade customs and commercial laws".

Her father belongs to a generation whose entrepreneurial hopes were dashed in the hardscrabble transition from communism to capitalism. "They started their businesses, but they couldn't scale, couldn't break through all the red tape and the corruption." Meanwhile, the oligarchy flourished.

For those like her father, Putin's nationalist narrative acts as a salve for personal frustrations. "These people are looking back now thinking, 'Well, I've not achieved anything, I'm disappointed with my life, but never mind, Crimea is ours,'" she says.

with no love for Putin



ZAC FRACKELTON FOR THE TIMES



Left: Jana Bakunina. Top: with her parents, Tatiana and Sergey. Above: Vladimir Putin

Bakunina's early promise was recognised by a tutor at her school in Germany who encouraged her to set her sights on Oxford. In the book she recalls sleeping rough in Victoria station in London on her way to an interview at St Catherine's College. Once she had gained her place, reading economics and management, she worked shifts as a dinner lady in the college canteen and joined the college rowing team.

On graduation she needed a well-paid job to settle her student debts, so went for an interview at the investment bank Merrill Lynch, adjusting her blazer to hide the indelible food stains on her waitressing shirt. She got the job and the section of the book recounting her adventures in the world of mergers and acquisitions could be dubbed "The Devil Wears Pravda" were it not so skilfully drawn. There was champagne deal-making, a makeover by way of Karen Millen ("a high street brand I could only have dreamt of wearing before") and dinners with senior bankers in London's most fashionable restaurants.

After the privations of Bakunina's Soviet childhood, elements of life in pre-crash London seemed grotesque. She recounts emerging from her tiny starter flat in the banker belt of Notting

Hill only to spot a co-worker coming out of the Starbucks on Westbourne Grove. Before she could get his attention, she saw him stop by a dustbin and dispose of a pocketful of coins.

Throughout this period, Bakunina says that she continued to "love Russia from afar", even as Putin's audacity intensified. "I sided with the Russian version of the story," she writes of the poisoning of the Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko in 2006. "At the time, it was unthinkable to believe that Putin himself had ordered to silence Litvinenko."

By the time Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Bakunina was working as a freelance corporate finance and venture capital consultant. Hearing the news was something of a political awakening. "It was Putin's absolute masterstroke because he fed the Russians something meaningful," she says. "He restored the honour and self-respect they used to derive from all those Soviet science and sporting glories of the past."

"People began to feel like they were part of a renewed Russia. Now, in order to remind them of their gratitude, Putin provokes conflict after conflict to maintain the narrative that Russia's pride is under siege." Bakunina started to write her book.

In the City, Bakunina's latest finance project is running a million-pound venture capital fund, Silvergate Investments 2, with the Labour peer and media entrepreneur Lord (Waheed) Alli. The company's stated aim is to invest in start-ups by women or ethnic minority founders.

The anonymous flowers Bakunina received last week turned out to be from a grateful mentee. "They were sent by a female entrepreneur I agreed to meet for a coffee," Bakunina says. "It's too early for us to invest in her business, but I helped her with some advice so she sent me the flowers as a thank you."

Bakunina is dismissive of Putin's election "landslide", citing voter intimidation ("managers at the post office had to report on their teams' voting"), incentives ("they gave out free food for voters") and flagrant ballot stuffing, footage of which is doing the rounds on Facebook.

I wonder if she isn't tempted to stop with the punditry now. Isn't she dangerously exposed? "Of course I'm scared because I'm only human. But I'm not doing anything at all compared to the thousands of super-brave people working inside Russia. And in terms of Putin's enemies,

I think I'm quite far from the top of the list. You have to remember that everything Russia does on British soil is for the benefit of a domestic audience. I'm not a spy, so I'm not a great poster girl for them to get rid of."

She acknowledges that many in Russia will see her as a slave to western propaganda, someone who has subconsciously absorbed values such as individual freedom, rule of law, democracy, meritocracy and gay rights. "And they'd be right," she says. Many of her contemporaries from home are apathetic by comparison. "They feel that in the past Russians overdosed on big ideas," she writes. "They drink German beer, shop at Ikea and support Liverpool. They go on holiday to Turkey or Egypt, concerned only with the cost and the facilities, not the political agenda of their choices."

Surely Putin can't hold on to power beyond the six years of this, his final term in office? Bakunina isn't convinced. "To me, the idea of him retiring to live by a lake in Italy is stranger than science fiction. I am an optimist about most things, but I'm not optimistic about that. Putin's immunity, his access to fabulous wealth and his own personal safety is entirely conditional on the allegiance of his vassals in the oligarchy. If that means staying in power, then he will never leave. They'll have to carry him out of the Kremlin on a stretcher."

A few hours after our conversation I check Bakunina's Twitter feed and see that she has changed tack. "After all the drama of Russian elections I just want to watch Mary Berry baste a duck. Forever after."

Bird's Milk by Jana Bakunina is published by Matador, £10

The lowdown

Oprah's bath

Hey you'll never guess what — it turns out that Oprah and I have the same hobby. I knew we were cut from the same cloth.

Oh yeah? What it is? Yoga? Hiking?

Nope, it's my very favourite: bathing.

Eh? Like in a swimming pool?

No, dur, like in a bath.

Right... That's not a hobby, though. That's just washing.

Ugh, I knew you wouldn't get it. Look, as Oprah said this week, bathing is her favourite hobby and she takes it "very seriously". And I do too.

I guess I can see where she's coming from. I do love a good hour of me-time. I always light candles. I like a bath bomb if I've had a long day.

Ha! OK. Right. That's not serious. Come back to me when you've got a tub that's been tailor-crafted for your body.

What?

You heard me. Oprah had a cast taken of her body that was turned into a tub chiseled from onyx and marble to fit her shape perfectly. I'm saving up for one now.

That's absolutely obscene. Like a plaster-of-Paris model?

I guess you could say... No, look, it's far more glamorous than that. Where do you even get one of those?

Well they're not so common right now, but this is Oprah after all, so I reckon they'll be in Ikea by September.

So let me recap: someone hand-wrapped Oprah Winfrey in a plaster cast...

The thing is, you just need to commit at the start. Sometimes you just gotta drop a bit of cash with a new hobby. Look at it this way: you'd never make it as a professional tennis player without a good racket.

Bathing is not a hobby!

With that attitude you're never going to be very good at it.

Emily Sargent

