

The day I met my mother...

David Good was four when his mother left him to return to her tribe in the Amazon. He didn't see her again for 20 years

He is in Yanomami tribal attire: a small woman in her mid-40s with black, bowl-shaped hair, topless, wearing bamboo sticks through her septum and lips. He is a handsome American college student: white T-shirt, khaki shorts, trimmed goatee. In the Venezuelan jungle clearing both are nervous, tearful, gingerly placing their hands on each other's shoulders. The moment captured on film is David Good meeting his mother Yarima in 2011, 20 years after she walked out on him and her family, returning to the Amazonian tribe into which she was born.

We watch the video in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, where David is a biology graduate, though he wants to return to the jungle and act "as a bridge" between the tribe and the outside world. "Everything in me wanted to hug her so badly," he says. "But in their culture you don't hug. She touched me to see if I was real. Then we broke down crying."

The family's story is controversial. In his 1991 book *Into The Heart*, Kenneth Good, David's father, related how as an anthropologist he immersed himself in Yanomami culture from 1975 to 1987. He met Yarima when she was "eight or nine" and was betrothed to her — as girls are in Yanomami culture — when she "couldn't have been more than 12", he 36. They first had sex in 1982 when she was 16 or 17, he 40, he tells me.

While Yanomami women are married in their early teens within the tribe, Good was a white anthropologist and debate raged over whether he had behaved wrongly and exploited her. In 1986, Yarima then 19, they were finally



married in the US, after an epic story of fighting authorities, controversy and death-defying canoe rides down jungle rapids. Having never worn clothes or seen her reflection in a mirror, let alone set eyes on a car or a shop, Yarima left the jungle for a new life in the US.

"I find it almost prurient that people ask me when I first had sex with Yarima," Ken says today. "These ages were nothing more than a guess, as the tribe only count to two, and their physiognomy of a very different race makes it hard to estimate ages."

The book ends with David, aged 3, and the family settled in New Jersey. A year and a half later, in 1992, Yarima returned to the Yanomami. David's last memory of her was being on a carnival ride and "sticking my head under her shirt because I was scared". He and his father shared a rueful joke that "while my friends' mothers were driving them to soccer practice, mine was naked in the jungle eating bugs".

The family — David has two siblings, Vanessa, 25, and Daniel, 21 — thought she'd had enough of American life. "It was too much of a shock for her to cope with," David says. She hadn't seemed unhappy. "We'd wrestle in the living room, listen to Michael Jackson and Gloria Estefan, she loved Pee-wee Herman." But reporters who met her at the time said she listened to Ken's

recordings of her tribe on loop and cried. Once she'd gone, Ken sent tapes via missionaries, saying: "I love you. I understand if you want to stay in the jungle, that's fine, but if you ever want to return let me know and I'll get you."

Later, David realised his mother missed her blood family. "When she disappeared I thought she didn't like us," David says. "I felt ashamed of my Yanomami side. I came to hate Yanomami culture and my mother, then I hated myself for feeling that." Ken tried to talk to him about his heritage, "but I did not want to hear about it". If anyone asked about his heritage, "I said I was Italian or Hispanic. I created an American life for myself."

Ken never talked about Yarima's leaving, raising three children alone. He never fell in love again or remarried. Ken's fame meant David "felt like a specimen under a microscope". One academic asked him what he wanted for Christmas. When he said a Super Nintendo, she said: "You're just like an American kid. I expected something different."

He dropped out of high school and from 16 to 21 developed "a real problem with alcohol". A turning point came when the mother of his then-girlfriend told him she was worried for her daughter's life. At 22, another girlfriend helped him "overcome my sensitivity about showing upset". Internally, he forgave his mother. "It was immediate."

David read his father's book. He is not outraged by the age-gap sexual relationship. "I can understand from a Western point of view why it freaks some people out. But Yanomami girls grow up differently. It was a consensual marriage based on love. He was criticised for snatching an Amazonian girl and parading her here as a trophy wife but it wasn't like that at all."

Finally face to face with his mother in 2011 (no small feat; the Venezuelan authorities had outlawed foreigners visiting Amazon tribes), David "was flooded with memories of being with her when I was young. It was such a beautiful moment. I didn't care why she left. I was with her finally."

Yarima's English isn't good but she acknowledged the word "mom". She asked after Ken, Vanessa and Daniel. "But she didn't offer any information about why she left us. I didn't push it.

“She'd never even worn clothes or seen her reflection in a mirror”



I'll ask her when I can speak fluent Yanomami." David discovered his mother, who he spent a month with, had remarried though was now single. He had a half-brother and soon felt "inherently part of a kinship network" of cousins and uncles. He went on a jungle trek with the tribe, walking barefoot like them, getting an infected foot. He tried to wear wads of tobacco in his lips as they do. He lost 22lb in three months on a diet including boa constrictor and piranha.

Yarima was offended when he turned down the two wives, aged around 19 and 16, she assigned him. His girlfriend Kelly said: "You better not be making any Yanomami babies

down there." David wasn't but his wives were persistent. "I realised we couldn't spend any time in my hammock. I had to persuade them that me not having sex with them was nothing against them." It was emotional to say goodbye to Yarima, "but I knew I was coming back".

The tribe is "going through ethnocide slowly but surely", David says. It is split between modern Yanomama who know Spanish and how to trade and the primitive tribe that does not. David wants to be "an ambassador". "Some people say, 'Leave it to be isolated,' but that's not realistic. The outside world is encroaching. I hope I can be a trustworthy bridge between doctors and agencies and the tribe."

The Yanomami his father knew are not the same today, David says. "It must be somewhat of a despondent realisation for him. He loves my mother. He loves the Yanomami. He did more to help them than most ever had or could. He knew them, respected them and communicated with them at their level. Though my parents' marriage hindered his career, I know that my father didn't care about that. He simply wanted to raise the family he so loved, but it all fell apart."

I speak to Ken, now 70 and a lecturer in New Jersey City University. He rarely gives interviews, fed up of "being misrepresented". He recalls Yarima's last words before disappearing into the jungle: "Take the kids and raise them. They're only part-Yanomami. When they're grown bring them back. I want to see them." Ken denies his marriage to Yarima was suspect: "Fifteen in Yanomami culture is different to ours.

How to speak Yanomami

Spellings are according to David Good's own phonetic system

Ya ohi — I'm hungry
Ya amishi — I'm thirsty
Waiha — wait
Yopri — hot (as in touch, or the weather is hot)
Hapo — come
Shoapeh — uncle
Napeh — mother
Sueh — woman (what I would call my "wife")
Hi-ii — bamboo sticks
Prahawa — far away
Ya maharishi — I'm tired
Mihi tata hio — give that to me

When people say, 'But you're Western, you knew it was wrong,' I say, 'I was living there, part of their culture.' He has "never" harboured any anger towards Yarima for abandoning the family. "She couldn't stand life here, she once said to me if there had been one Yanomami person in New Jersey, she would have felt better."

He too saw Yarima for the first time in 20 years in 2011: David linked his father and mother via Skype from the jungle. Ken was with Vanessa who "didn't have anything to say" to Yarima. "Neither she nor Daniel really knew their mother." Skype brought Yarima face to face with Vanessa's children, her grandchildren. Between Ken and Yarima, there was no post mortem on their marriage. He told her she looked pretty; she told him, now bald, he looked old. Does Ken want to reunite with Yarima? "Yes, I do. But it would have to be back in the jungle. She said she'd never come back here." Would he go back to the jungle? "Yes of course, though I have a bad back. I still love her. She's the love of my life."

David doesn't want to "disappear for 12 years" like his father. "I want to live an American life," he says. He hopes to spend "extended periods" in the jungle. "I have this yearning to live the Yanomami life of simplicity." Ken once told David he had experienced "the essence of humanity" with the tribe. Similarly, David felt he "had never been so happy or human" than with them. Father and son's wistful tones echo one another: the Good family's adventures in the jungle may not be over.

Tim Teeman

Ask Professor Tanya Byron I'm so fussy about food that it's ruining my life. How can I change?



Q I'm a very fussy eater. When I was 5, I suddenly stopped eating certain foods and would eat only junk food, I don't know why. My parents took me to the doctor but nothing worked and they eventually said that I would grow out of it. The problem is, I haven't.

I have tried to eat new foods, but I get really anxious. It's as if my brain is telling me that something bad will happen, and I get so wound up that I am sometimes physically sick. I recently went to the doctor and he told me to stop being so fussy.

I started university in September and have really struggled because I feel that I can't socialise. I'm too scared to eat out in case there is nothing on the menu that I like (which happens a lot). It's made me realise how much this rules my life. When I was at school, my friends knew that I was fussy and I didn't have to explain — they would pick places I was comfortable eating in.

I have no health problems, despite my limited diet. I get so fed up with eating the same foods, and it means that I often end up eating no main meal and just snacking for days, which causes arguments with my family. I don't know what else to do. If it was as simple as just being fussy I wouldn't be living like this.

Anna

A This is a very real problem for which you need help and support. It is clear that you have developed a severe and long-term food phobia, which should have been addressed when you were younger.

Phobias sit under the umbrella of anxiety disorders. Being phobic leads to avoidance of the feared object, situation or experience.

By avoiding the feared situation (which in reality is non-threatening) the anxiety is reinforced and the brain automatically perceives that what is happening (in your case, being confronted with unfamiliar foods and eating out) poses a threat to one's health.

Panic ensues and as the throat tightens and the gag reflex kicks in (a classic anxiety response), the "feared" food cannot be swallowed. To begin, it would be worth contacting a nutritionist for a full assessment of your diet in terms of its content, and also to try to find out whether you have any allergies that may have led to you avoiding certain foods when you were 5.

Next, make a three-column list of foods that you always eat (green foods), sometimes eat (amber foods) and never eat (red foods). For each meal, make sure there are some amber foods included in very small portions. Push amber foods into the green list and then work through those on the red list,

starting with the least challenging first. You also need to look at everything you eat and break it down into component parts. For example, if you eat burgers then you eat bread and meat, and whatever else sits within the buns; if you eat fries then you eat potatoes, and so on. This is called food mapping.

List each component food and underneath write down similar things that you could try because they come from the same food group. Rank them in order of most similar to least similar to the component food that you eat.

For example, under the bread section you would start with a burger bun, and then move through the spectrum to ciabatta, garlic bread, wholemeal pittas, etc. Take it slowly.

Now start to practise eating your component foods on their own. Once you are used to the taste of only burger bun (for example), move to the next related food on the list. For example, white toast, moving eventually to brown toast. Try each new food in small amounts and try to chew and swallow slowly, increasing the amounts gradually.

Alongside this you need to manage your anxiety. Download from the internet some muscle relaxation exercises, which will teach you how to calm your body and your breathing. Focus on these skills while trying the new foods. Learn to acknowledge that your reaction to the food is a "learned anxiety" that has little to do with the food but everything to do with the experience of trying something that your palate is unused to.

By mastering the anxiety associated with new food, you will break the "learned threat" association. It is important to understand that the food is not going to cause you harm, however much your "threat perception" response makes you believe that it will. By mastering the anxiety, alongside trying the new food, you will disconnect this long-entrenched, illogical belief.

Share this graded step approach, known as systematic desensitisation, with a close friend who can support you. If possible, make it a challenge that is fun, with no time constraints. Pace it in a manageable way but engage a friend to push you, if necessary.

Alternatively, you could seek professional support through a psychologist who uses the cognitive behavioural therapy approach. Speak to your GP or see bps.org.uk.

Food is fundamentally associated with social behaviour and so I urge you to allow yourself to socialise with friends and just eat what you can as you build your confidence. If you go to a restaurant and can only manage bread at first, so be it. The simple act of being there and eating what you can, while having fun, will further desensitise you to your phobia. Take it one step at a time and please let me know how you get on.

If you have a family problem, e-mail profantanyabyron@thetimes.co.uk

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