

Best Before End Times

Josh Mcloughlin hallucinates his way through one day's worth of lockdown cooking.

I was knocking through Aristotle back in mid March when I came across a scrawled addendum. 'The best way to spend a national lockdown during a pandemic,' the preface began, 'is to flee from London to your girlfriend's parent's house in rural South Norfolk.'

'To achieve the highest honour among men and the respect of the gods,' the marginaliant elaborated, 'choose a girlfriend whose parents began boarding food long before it was socially unacceptable.'

BALTI CHICKPEA CURRY

- Kanpur Garden balti sauce (Best Before June 2005)
- Sainsbury's sliced beetroot (BB August 2008)
- Campo Largo chickpeas (BB January 2017)
- Don Mario peeled plum tomatoes (BB September 2016)
- Grilled peppers in brine (BB December 2011)
- Dried barley (BB December 2015)
- Morrison's pine nuts (BB May 2015)

STRAWBERRIES AND CUSTARD

- Bird's custard (BB March 2012)
- Cofrusa strawberries in fruit juice (BB May 2015)

TO DRINK

- Bols crème de menthe (Unknown, c. 1980s)

LUNCH

For more than two weeks I've quarried, excavating the faded, the wrinkled, the cobwebbed and the dented. Today, I assembled my first lockdown larder meal: a balti curry followed by strawberries and cream, both served on elegant Rachael Cocker ceramics and paired with a delightful drop of crème de menthe.

The balti sauce itself was at its best before June 2005, marking nearly fifteen years to the day since the greatest Champions League final comeback of all time. Dubbed 'The Miracle of Istanbul', Liverpool overturned a 3-0 half-time deficit to triumph over one of the greatest sides the sport has ever seen: the A C Milan of Maldini, Pirlo, Kaká and Crespo.

The indomitable underdog spirit those Heroes in Red showed in the face of catastrophe, I mused, was exactly the resilience the world needed now. I thought bitterly of the panic buyers and cursed them. I prised the lid off the curry sauce and a waft of gas, hopefully non-toxic, gurgled out.

For a few seconds, I saw a spectral apparition in the vapour, a glassy disturbance in the air, delicate yet unmistakable. It was Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard in his pomp, arms aloft, urging the Atatürk Olympic Stadium to believe in miracles, to place hope in the capacity of mere men to overcome trials fit for gods.

'Remember me', he seemed to mouth in that aggressive way Scousers do, clearly riffing on the Ghost of Old King Hamlet's famous refrain. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. 'Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe', I muttered. The sauce stank. I cooked the curry. It had a pungent, salty tanginess. The beetroot crumbled to dust like the remains of a moth dislodged after days and weeks of stillness, in the place where it came to grief.

DINNER

RABBIT TERRINE ON HOMEMADE OATCAKES

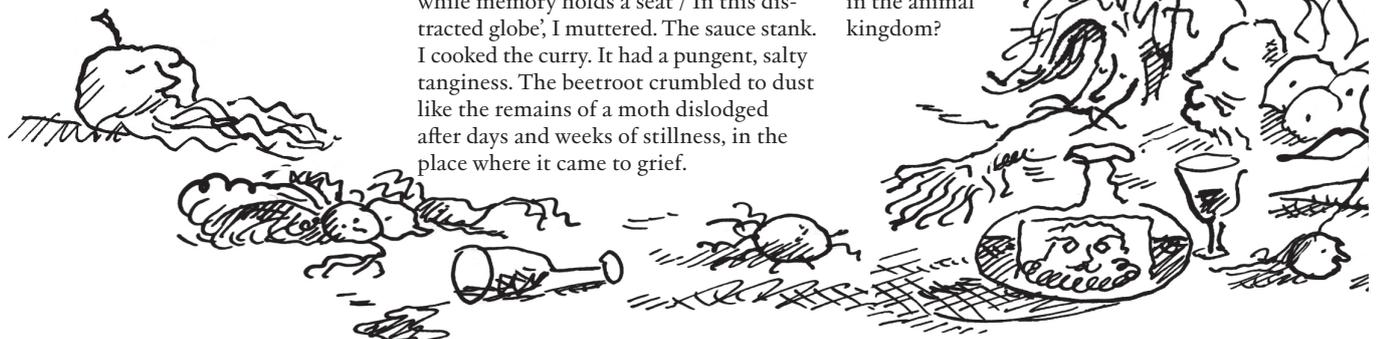
- Netto terrine de lapin (BB Jan 2018)

HOMEMADE OATCAKES

- Sainsbury's porridge oats (BB June 2010)
- Dr Oetker baking powder (BB May 2010)
- Morrisons self-raising flour (BB November 2017)
- Grandessa squeezey blossom honey (BB May 2011)
- Garnish: Kania parsley (BB December 2005)

Suppressing a dry-heave, I contemplated my starter Netto terrine de lapin served on homemade oatcakes with a delicate parsley dusting. Yet, as I stared at the minced rabbit, the undulating Hampshire hills overlooking Watership Down oozed before my distracted mind.

Like Fiver, I became clairvoyant. Fiver's apocalyptic premonition at the beginning of the deeply traumatic 1978 animated 'children's' film was laid out in all its grainy horror before my eyes, followed by a grim succession of leporine bloodletting. The familiar questions presented themselves: why was there so much violence in a U-rated film? Why were clipped, Sandhurst tones so pervasive in the animal kingdom?



Illustrations by Matthieu Cossé

NIGHTCAP

VINTAGE COURVOISIER (C. 1970S)

Exhausted, I uncorked a vintage bottle of Courvoisier dating from the 1970s, intending a swift nightcap before bed. 'Le Cognac de Napoleon' announced the outlandish baroque italics on the label. It should really be 'Le Cognac de P Diddy', I mused, given how his 2001 hit *Pass the Courvoisier* resuscitated the then-ailing market for French cognac in America and represented the high watermark of hip-hop's love affair with the spirit.

I thought of *Vossi Bop* and wondered if whether future musicologists would see Stormzy's 2019 anthem as a slice of self-reflexive nostalgia that both knowingly descanted on one of twenty-first century rap's great *leitmotifs* whilst, at the same time, achieving its generic apotheosis, not unlike how John Ford's 1634 play *Perkin Warbeck* both crowned and reflected on the terminal decline of Elizabethan and Jacobean historical drama.



MIDNIGHT SNACK

SPAGHETTI ALLA SALMONE

- Tesco gluten and milk-free spaghetti (BB March 2007)
- John West tinned wild red salmon (BB June 2017)
- Cherry peppers in brine (BB September 2012)
- Kania dried basil (BB 2007)
- Don Mario passata (BB December 2016)
- Garlic and onion (BB unknown: c. the Fall of New Labour)

The date on the spaghetti matched the dried basil I'd exhumed: March 2007. These ingredients, I imagined, were frozen in a prelapsarian world before the first of this century's great financial crises. Petrified in time, the pasta had no idea of the ignominious end to the New Labour era.

The basil was likewise eternally locked in the cautious optimism of the day, hoping that House of Lords reform had at last heralded a more egalitarian democratic superstructure, and the phone-hacking scandal had finally called time on the unchecked political influence of the bilious tabloid press.

I tried to imagine myself back then: smoking inside a pub all night before going back to the subprime mortgage-bought house I could barely afford, nodding off to *Celebrity Big Brother* repeats. Right now I'd give anything, I told myself, to trade places with those mid-noughties store cupboard essentials, just for one night.

UK History

It's time to rewrite the curriculum. We asked the country's major political parties for their thoughts.

CONSERVATIVE PARTY

1066 Battle of Hastings: Peaceful assimilation of the Saxon and Norman governmental roles.

1170 The murder of Thomas Becket. Appropriate and proportionate defunding incident of an anti-government mouthpiece determined to push a progressive agenda.

1400 The Murder of Richard II. A necessary and wholly consensual removal of an unsuccessful leader in order to allow a more popular figure to lead Britain to greatness.

1773 The Boston Tea Party. Ambitious establishment of a trans-Atlantic Free Trade zone, ensuring the access to the best possible seabed markets for British goods and cementing the Special Relationship.

1842 Treaty of Nanking: high point of British Empire, creating the strong Anglo-Chinese bonds that continue to this day.

1939-45 Britain triumphes against Axis forces. Notable victories at Midway, Stalingrad and Kursk.

LABOUR PARTY

793 Viking invaders redistribute assets from wealth-hoarding Tory monks.

1348 Black Death: A third of the country falls down dead owing to Tory rats.

1533-8 Marian Persecutions. An extensive internal review of membership of the NEC, after infiltration by Tory spies.

1588 Francis Drake repulses the Spanish Armada, led by Count Antonio del Torio.

1665-6 Great Plague. A wholly preventable public health calamity caused by Tory cuts to the NHS.

2017 Jeremy Corbyn triumphs at the General Election with a majority of -84.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

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