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## **THE CONSOLATION OF FOOD**

Written by **Valentine Warner**

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# Life, Death and Cooking

I wanted to call this book *THIS IS NOT A COOKBOOK!* but I have learnt to pick my battles.

It is not an autobiography. It's not even a memoir. It's the equivalent of a bag of groceries and household needs from different shops – leeks, light bulbs, socks, sticky moth traps, steaks and soap. What I mean is that, like its author, half magpie, half chameleon, it's a jangle of odds and sods, a collection that represents the frustrations and the joys of my life thus far.

But God forbid *anything* in this day and age does not have a THEME! And as my life, generally speaking, does not have a theme and is devoid of any obvious routine – apart from brushing my teeth – I guess it really is food that has tied it all together.

In all my cookbooks, the point was never really the sum parts of a plate of food, but the events that led up to it, by which I do not mean the completion of a recipe. Recipes are a ball-ache to write. Although cooking is a happy action, an arrangement of shapes, colours and taste, I find measurements a hassle as they often don't reflect the way I cook. No. The joy in the writing for me has always been the story *before* the recipe, the people I've come across, the surrounding and situation I find myself in. The recipes included in this book are close to my heart, certainly, just not a pedantically curated collection but more a case of this is what I cook, this is what you get.

Originally, I put forward that it should be a small book printed on psalm paper, *Consolations in Food: A Cookbook for Divorcees and the Recently Bereaved*. It was thought that this was perhaps a little grim, so it became a book about enjoyment, grief, restlessness, disasters and success. Bereavement and divorce nonetheless are still allowed to nestle among the strange fruit, smeared across these pages. But, really, I wrote it to entertain you, and in the hope it may stop you occasionally from simply 'reading on'.

Ultimately, this is a story book with food in it; and, of course, that other essential embroidery for life, music. So integral to my own daily existence and always on in the kitchen.

No doubt with certain references it will soon date, but I've written it with an openness, hoping that by sharing my idiocies and sadness as much as my frivolity, we may *all* decide to share more, admit our faults, slow down, change our minds and say 'this is too fast, slow down this mad carousel, and let me see what's going on.'

Music, food and words. A consolation surely. Maybe not the words, but I just hope you find at least one thing, maybe two, that make the purchase worth it.

## Music

Music is pretty integral to this book. It has played such a big part in my life. In my experience, we all want to inflict our music taste on others, and this is my opportunity to do so. If you dislike the stories or recipes then, hopefully, you can enjoy the music and benefit from one of the three constituents.

I set myself the task of matching a song to each story and recipe, but soon realized that links via obvious association (i.e. 'I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire' partnered with my habit for burning tea towels in The Backgammon Board) meant a rather trite association between song and subject, culminating in a lot of songs I didn't really care about.

Entering songs in accordance with periods of my life would mean a distressing amount of Roger Whittaker in the early years, some nosebleed punk from my art college years, followed by a lot of questionable bleeps. So I've cherry-picked what I consider the best from my mixed bag of 700 scratchy LPs, wallets of jumping CDs, and hours and hours of combing Spotify. Most of it, bar one or two, can be found there. Some of you may be aware of My Kitchen Beets, posted bi-weekly, accompanied by a picture of beetroots wearing earphones.

So I decided to simply make a long list. To be played as and when, as it

is hardly likely you will find the track to then snuggle down and read the recommended nonsense that goes with it. I mean, I certainly can't read and listen to music at the same time. No. I keep it for sulking, driving (except when trying to park), easy Sundays and dancing in the kitchen. Later at night, it is a favourite pastime to climb on my sturdy marble table (podium) wearing my earphones and boxer shorts, and bop till 1 am. Instantly preferable to exercising in that most wretched of places, the gym.

Music has been so essential to my life because, being one of life's fidgets, it fills the gaps between things. The gaps I'm not so good at knowing what to do with. My restlessness has seen me find and consume music with the same voracity I do food. A man of appetites, of which music is one. A life full of music and food ... great!

Maybe it would have been better to understand the opportunities for silence in my life more deeply than I perhaps have, but the upshot is that music has taught me a lot. Whether the words, the melodic emotion, or the fact we chose *that* song at *that* time, it carries the lurching boat of my life along on its waves. In cold, stony times, it has allowed me to cry; in warm bright times, to feel a joy I can only associate with it.

Aged ten, in the Bridport record shop, I bought my three first cassettes: 'One Step Beyond' by Madness, 'Stray Cat Strut' by Stray Cats, and Debbie Harry's *KooKoo* (because I had a huge crush in her that would see me put my arm around my pillow and ask her what she wanted for breakfast). My little cassette recorder played them again and again until each was either chewed or stretched.

(The inner leaf of *KooKoo* had a picture of Debbie with her cheeks skewered by long needles. It freaked the living hell out of me, almost as much as antlered Herne the Hunter's hairy hand snatching me in the woods.)

I was cringingly uncool for school and its musical tribes. I was dressed primarily by the shop Fosters. (Thanks, Mum!) So I'd return to school with those nylon bar-chart jumpers, Second Image jeans, not Levis, and Go Flash trainers, not Adidas. Thankfully though, I had a very cool sister who'd pick me up from school occasionally and whizz me back to her flat in London. En route we'd listen to cassette after cassette of Sly and Robbie, Motown, The Eurythmics, Fela Kuti and Mantronix.

I owe a lot to my darling sister, far more than she thinks, thank you for the music, sis. And I must quickly thank my school dormitory captain, Vere, for obsessively playing Julian Cope. It seems to have stuck.

My mother was the lead singer of the family, the musical matriarch, a passionate jazz singer. High times and evenings, when guests were round, she'd stand, hitch up her skirt, stick a foot on a pulled-out chair, throw a glass over her shoulder (once through a painting), and off she'd go. She had a brilliant voice. My dad's face would light up with his 'that's why I married her' look, while my brother and I would flash each other an 'oh no, please don't' glance and cringe with embarrassment. 'Please, don't ...' She'd dismiss us with the flick of the hand.

I will never forget Mum singing at a charity event to raise money so that the Electric Cinema on Portobello Road might not close down. In she sashayed, blue sequin gown and meringue hair. She looked the crowd over with that cheeky mocking look and belted out 'Amen Corner'.

'Hey brothers, hey sisters, we got hypocrites in this crowd.'

She brought the house down.

Mum owned a lot of music and played it most of the time. Marianne Faithfull, Grace Jones, The Beatles, Django Reinhardt. If the record player or radio wasn't singing, she most certainly would be. She sang to her children regularly, often in a cockney accent, and to this day I sing those songs to my own children. 'The Alphabet of Love' and 'Little Sammy Fiddlekins'.

Little Sammy Fiddlekins the fat boy,  
one day called upon his uncle Brown  
just before he left young Sammy was presented  
with a brand new half a crown  
(Diddlyanarna)  
Feeling rather thirsty he went into a shop  
he drank ten lemonades a dozen ginger beers  
And then there was a great big POP  
More work for the undertaker, another little job for the tombstone maker  
at the local cemetery they've been very, very busyyyyyyyyyy  
[slowed down and sombre] On a brand new grave for Sammyyyyyyy

Fish with 'airs on brown bread!

The fish with hairs on always puzzled me deeply, but I understood marginally more when I attempted to make smoked mackerel pâté while wearing an angora jumper.

Mind you, my own occasional outpourings ... now that was embarrassing. Nauseating little shit that I was, guests would be asked to turn their chairs and be politely forced to watch either a Warner Brothers performance or, worse still, a singular brother ... normally me.

I recall with embarrassment my rendition of 'Oh for the Wings of a Dove' while simultaneously doing bad robotic manoeuvres. Christ! I can just see me doing those awful jerky moves, my chubby flushed face squeaking 'Far awaaaay far away wou-ould I roam ...'

Choral body popping makes for a dismal combination. I can only imagine guests driving home, one turning to the other to say, 'Darling, that Warner boy is a tragic little oaf, isn't he?'

But it was my father who was the biggest surprise. One day, I discovered nearly every seven- and twelve-inch record by Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. I assumed they belonged to my mother; my father was most indignant. 'They're mine,' he growled. 'You simply don't know the half of it.'

I should not have been surprised, for despite being born in 1918, my father was a most modern man. One foot in cosmopolitan life, the other in a cowpat, his interests were beyond wide ranging, which is what made him such wonderful company. There was nothing obvious about him.

Guaranteed to sob during a certain opera, he was very knowledgeable about classical music. But there was another side to him. Once, when just the two of us went to Paris, I was around thirteen at the time, he said, 'We'll just pop in to IRCAM.' A French institute for the science of music, sound and avant-garde electro-acoustic art music, he was in some curious capacity working for.

Here I sat on a stool and listened to electronic pan pipes, played from the first studio mixing desk I'd ever seen.

Simulated '60 foot long pan pipes as if blown by lungs belonging to a man 120 foot tall.'

We heard squeaks, plinks, bloobs and scratches, and I sat there wide-eyed

as sounds I'd never heard or imagined oozed, squelched and boomed from that table of dials and huge speakers, accompanied by another English fellow. Named Birtwhistle. Anyway.

Ethnicity, food and music are intertwined. Music and food feed the free parts of our spirit as do art and drink. All important. Stick another sausage on, stick another record on, open the wine and I'll make you a small snake from the foil.

I sincerely hope you like Radio Val (see page 254).

# Youth and Young Manhood



# Curtsey

I have never fitted in. A lone operator, I have made efforts to, but I am nonetheless what I would describe as an outsider. This is not a bad thing.

Last to be chosen for school sports' teams, first to be caught poaching at the local trout farm, I certainly found it as hard to 'follow the rules' as a boy or to 'play the game' in my adult clothes.

Nature or nurture? I'm not sure. The tracks to some extent seem laid from the very moment my parents chose each other (or I chose them perhaps. Oh the arrogance!).

When my father was the British Ambassador to Japan between 1972 and 1975, the Queen came to stay, and a hurry-scurry of preparation threw the embassy into a countdown of rehearsals and 'just so' preparation.

My father took efforts to teach me to bow and introduce myself properly and, when my moment came to welcome the Queen and pay my respects, key wound, I was pointed in the right direction and sent forward.

Few might be surprised to know I confidently walked before Her Majesty and curtsied.

There you have it. An oddity.

## Baked Mackerel with Miso

### Serves 2

- 1½ tbsp groundnut (peanut) or sunflower oil
- 2 medium mackerel, head and tail removed, body cut into 4 barrels
- 1 medium sweet onion, neatly cut to medium dice
- 50 ml/1⅔ fl oz/2¾ tbsp Japanese sake or white sweet vermouth
- 100 ml/3½ fl oz/½ cup Japanese soy sauce
- 2 tbsp dark brown sugar
- 1 tbsp honey (do not use heather honey)

- 2 tbsp red miso paste
- 1 large thumb of ginger, peeled and finely grated
- 2 tsp brown rice vinegar or malt vinegar
- 2 finger-sized strips of satsuma or orange rind
- 2 spring onions (scallions), chopped
- Freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil in a very small casserole or non-stick heavy-based saucepan (that owns a lid). Fry the mackerel pieces on their open flesh sides, over a medium heat, until well browned and crisp. Turn once to do the other side. Be careful not to let the oil smoke.

Remove the mackerel to a plate, add the onion to the pan and sauté. This will take 12 or so minutes as the onion needs to be lightly browned, totally soft and sweet. Add the sake or vermouth and allow to almost entirely evaporate.

In a bowl mix together the soy sauce, sugar, honey, miso, ginger, vinegar and some pepper before pouring it into the pan. Add the mackerel to the pan. Bring it all to a bubble. Add the rind and 100 ml/3½ fl oz/½ cup water. Put the lid on and simmer very gently for 1 hour, turning the pieces halfway through.

Remove the mackerel very carefully to a plate and spoon over the sauce. Scatter with some spring onion and serve with steamed Japanese, basmati or pudding rice.

**Tip** If you feel so inclined, very finely slice half a medium cucumber. Toss with a teaspoon of sea salt and allow to drain in a sieve (strainer) while the mackerel cooks. Squeeze out the excess water.

Mix together rice or white wine vinegar and sugar to an equal balance of sweet and sour. Add a good piece of peeled and finely grated ginger into the mix and add the cucumber to it. This works well with the sweet fattiness of the mackerel. Enjoy with Seaweed and Cucumber Salad (see page 17).

## Nasu Dengaku – a Variation

Normally, you will see this served as a whole half an aubergine (eggplant), but sometimes not. I replaced some of the sugar or honey with maple syrup, given that varieties of acer (maple) tree are so common across Japan. I used the tangerine in this simply because it was there – citrus also plays a significant role in Japanese cuisine. This was once served to me with the burnt sticker still on the skin. Remember to remove it.

### Serves 2

- 1 large aubergine, washed and stalk removed
- 1 tbsp sunflower oil
- 50 ml/1<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> fl oz/2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> tbsp mirin or sake
- 2 tbsp red miso paste
- 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> tangerines, juiced, plus a grating of tangerine zest (optional)
- 1 tbsp maple syrup
- 1 tsp soft brown sugar
- 1 large thumb of fresh ginger root, peeled finely grated
- 1 tsp fresh Japanese soy sauce
- 1 tbsp sesame seeds, toasted
- 1 spring onion (scallion), finely sliced

Halve the aubergine lengthways, then cut each half 4 times lengthways and then ‘cube’. Fry in a dry pan until well charred but not black. There will be smoke, so turn on the extraction. Add the oil and continue frying until all is pathetically tender, about 7–8 minutes.

While the aubergine cooks, reduce the mirin to a syrup, then stir in the miso paste, tangerine juice, maple syrup and sugar. Reduce at a simmer until the thickness of tahini. Take off the heat and stir in the ginger and soy sauce. Tip into the tender aubergines and fry for 30 seconds or so or until all is absorbed and the sugars are just beginning to catch and caramelize.

Spoon on to plates and scatter with the toasted sesame seeds and chopped spring onion. Finish with a little grated zest from the tangerine if inclined.

Lovely with sips from little cup of hot sake and with a seaweed salad (below).

## Seaweed and Cucumber Salad with Soy Orange Dressing

### Serves 2

- Half a cucumber, peeled and very thinly sliced
- 1 tbsp sea salt
- 15 g/1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> oz mixed dried seaweed
- 1 medium carrot, peeled and very finely julienned (optional)
- 2 tsp toasted sesame seeds or toasted buckwheat, to serve

### For the dressing

- 1 tbsp Japanese soy sauce
- 1/2 tsp Dijon mustard
- 1/2 tsp wholegrain mustard
- 1 1/2 tsp caster (superfine) sugar
- 1 1/2 tsp white or brown rice vinegar
- Juice of a quarter of a small sweet, tart orange
- Half thumb of ginger, peeled and very finely grated

Mix the cucumber with the salt in a colander placed over a bowl. Let it drip for 30–60 minutes. When done, wring out any remaining juice and discard.

Cook, or soak the seaweed in boiled water as per the package instructions. Drain. Mix all ingredients for the dressing together thoroughly.

In a bowl, toss together the cucumber, seaweed and carrot, if using, and mix gently. Place in 2 serving bowls and pour over the dressing. Scatter with sesame seeds or buckwheat.

## Hares

My mother's jugged hare was a legendary dish in the Warner family, and we ate it regularly through the autumn and winter due to the voracity with which I hunted the poor things. A rich, glistening mahogany colour, it was a luscious, dark pool of jointed hare meat, red wine, lemon zest, bay leaf, ginger, garlic, brown sugar, rowan jelly, butter, bacon, onions, celery and carrots, all thickened with cocoa powder and the hare's blood mixed with vinegar. It did not smell nice during the cook, but it was unctuous and eye-rollingly delicious by completion. Always served on Sunday, it featured regularly in thank-you letters from guests.

I knew our fifteen acres like the back of my hand – those ash branches on which wood pigeons would pause, a preferred holly the pheasants would roost in, where the rabbits emerged at dusk, that patch of clover wandering ducks went to, where a covey of partridge was sure to play King of the Castle on a rotting haystack, and the favoured places of the mysterious hare, an animal now most dear to me.

I will not lie: when these creatures were hard to find, young and bloodthirsty and with my heart thumping in my ears, I'd crawl under the barbed wire or cross the road that separated our three fields from the land that was not ours, but where hares could be found in greater numbers. The jacket I used to wear was a testament to my forbidden inclinations. The torn back and liner around the shoulders told the tale. With the intent of a hungry Inuit, I was also armed with an early understanding of perspective and foreshortening that would see me use even a fence post as cover for a stooping approach. I was a deadly little bugger.

I remember the smell of the gloomy apple shed where my quarry would dangle, one leg pushed through an incision in the other leg to make a fur fastening to hook over a nail. Apples, damp, musty newspaper and dust mixed with the gamey smell of pelt, feathers and blood fills my nose as I write this. It shapes a memory so clear I could be standing there right now.

My father knew, I think, of my poaching, not least because he worked in

his beloved garden as often as I'd slip out with my gun. And so it seems most likely that he saw me slip beneath the fence or slowly disappear through a hole in the hedge. But he said little on it and, in hindsight, allowed me to shoot far too much. I patrolled those grounds like the most fervent, ruthless sentry. I would not allow my own son to do so with the same appetite, if indeed that time should ever come. And I have never understood why I was allowed to shoot so much, for my mother certainly disapproved.

If my father were alive today, he'd now be 101. He fought in the navy during the Second World War and had, no doubt, seen a lot of death. He disliked killing, adored plants and birds ... all nature ... and had himself stopped shooting shortly after the war. I've come to think that, as a lonely child growing up in rural Dorset, he'd learnt to depend on his own company, and had thrown himself into learning as much as he could from books and fields or wherever learning could be found. For the same reasons, I think he was loath to separate me from something I loved, perhaps amplified by feelings of guilt at being absent for a large part of his sons' lives. It was his old gun I used, an implement that belonged to us both, part of a wild world we both loved, and a rawness that we both found so essential and that could only be found outdoors.

There was an unbroken understanding between us which was, quite simply, if you kill it you eat it. There were a few exceptions, of which the less said the better. I think it is particular to growing boys to try to break with the world, almost as if it's a requirement to understanding how it's put together. But nonetheless, boys can be horrors, and I have since been stung by regret.

If he did indeed know of my offences, to my luck I don't think it was by way of the two keepers who did catch me. One simply caught me up under his arm and gave me a thorough thrashing I can still feel the vibrations of today. The other took my brand-new game bag and said, 'Let's be having an exchange then, and let it also be a lesson, you silly boy.' I was so upset to lose my Christmas present, and pretended I had mislaid it in forgetfulness.

I have stopped shooting hares now, and for good. Though I nearly wavered this last year. There had been a lot of talk of cooking on a rough shoot in Scotland and, taken by an urge to cook hare, I asked my host if I could kill



one. They were more plentiful than I have seen in a long time, yet even as I asked I was wrestling internally with my request to break my promise to myself. But permission was granted, and the moment soon arose when one broke from the grass and out over the new wheat shoots, cantering in that strange lolloping way. Even before my gun reached my shoulder I knew I would not follow through.

I have come to believe that hares rub against the calves of mother nature as she stares down at them lovingly. They hold answers we would all be wiser to know, and keep secrets with which we should never be trusted. And to explain this, I shall repeat a story I included in my first-ever cookbook, not out of laziness but because I think as many people should read it as possible. (I hope neither publisher feels swizzed.)

Some time soon after Christmas, my father and I were on the home stretch of a well-known walk we'd often take, likely after a big lunch. As we came off the Berkshire Downs, passing under the grim icon of Combe Gibbet, the sky was as chalk white and flint grey as those fragments that litter up the plough. The air felt muffled and bitterly cold, and you could feel snow coming on. At the bottom of the hill, knees shaken by the steep incline and sheep ruts, we strode out onto the flat, wide track that lined up, almost, with the top of our garden in the distance. Hares were a common sight here; we could see a gathering of many some distance away, but something immediately struck us as odd. An unnerving, witchy disturbance settled on us both as we noticed a distinct formation to this gathering.

Some thirty metres away, nine hares formed an almost perfect circle, probably five metres across. And within the circle, two hares stood back to back. Was this a court passing judgement on the two in the centre, or were those two talking to the circle? We did not know.

We walked slowly ever closer, the hairs on our necks prickling and tingling, our eyes wide, our steps careful. Too close. With a discernable air of annoyance, they broke their coven at our disturbance, and each went its separate way.

We were silent. Struck dumb. Both quietly unsettled.

Thinking the same thing, we turned to each other, put our arms on each other's shoulders and swore not only had we both seen the same thing, but that should either of us tell the tale and it be doubted, we would back each

other up on the truth of it. We then walked home in silence through the dusk, holding hands as the snow began to fall.

## If You Haven't Tried It, Then How Do You Know You Don't Like It?

I once handed a teenager a globe artichoke. The astonished, almost scared look on their face would have not been out of place if I had handed them a pangolin.

I've taught cooking to a fair few young people over my career. But for four years, once a year, I taught at Jamie Oliver's Fifteen Foundation, and enjoyed it hugely. I'm sad that it no longer exists.

Every year the lesson unfolded the same way. I'd walk into a room of kids larking about or fiddling with their phones, a few hoods up, and the reception not exactly warm. A posh voice and a silly name serve as a cold starter. That is until I open my boxes to tip out six dead rabbits in fur or reveal a clicking, tangled mass of live crayfish, claws raised in defence against a strange new world.

'Wicked!' or 'Siiiiic!' would be their collective outburst. And the atmosphere in the room would change immediately. Those sulzier students, who tend to sit at the back, would then rise from their chairs to have a look.

I start going on about rabbits and how their summertime jiggy-jiggy makes them unpleasant to eat, and start to hear giggles; how the watercress and wild garlic I've bought along were pulled up near the crayfish, a meal produced from an hour spent outside, and now I have their total concentration.

I explain about the invasion of these American signal crayfish. 'Melt butter and declare war,' I say. They like it, and ask if they can come to catch crayfish with me. I tell them that if they come then it might mess up their trainers but that I will have a think. (We did in fact later offer just such a trip as a prize for best student.)

Unwrapping the fish, I explain mackerel can be caught using flowers superglued onto hooks ... and all of a sudden the phones are ignored. When possible, I want them to eat things raw before they're cooked and explain the differences they notice between the chillies they try. Most of them want a go at grasping the crayfish without getting nipped, while another backs away: 'No way, man, no way! I is not touching that!' Others are already trying to skin the rabbits before I've even explained how.

They're IN!

While claws and fur are helpful, storytelling is key.

I never remembered much from my years of history lessons, but what I do remember is everything taught me by Mr Parks. His King Harold never just got an arrow in the eye. No. There was a spurt of blood, a tumble under the pounding hooves, mud flying as the battle clanged around. The breath of his princes' stank with rotten meat while the great hall smelt of roasting boar, leather, spilt mead and dog farts. He was an eighties precursor to *Horrible Histories* and I looked forward to his lessons.

Kids like stories, as they embroider and illuminate otherwise dogmatic lists of facts. Stories are more personal, convey more care, and keep the orator as entertained as the student. What better place to find never-ending stories than in nature and food, that the link between them be planted deeply?

In their pairs, they interpret the cooking instruction I've shown them.

'Valentine can I put hot sauce in mine?'

'Of course you can.'

They want to know of the stranger things I've eaten. An easy win.

Timid at worst, straight in at best, by the end of these cooking sessions they'd be eating boiled crayfish, rabbit stew and fried mackerel and, better still, they enjoy them. They taste each other's cooking, mark each other with tenderness and teasing. Always a hard start, it was always a good end.

As I left that final class, I told them that by not paying attention to food and nature, or not looking after their world, they might find themselves trying to spit roast their Nike trainers over a small fire of melting iPhones, crouched together on a bald rock.

'Oi, mate! You're crazy!' they jeered warmly and, to tell the truth, I was sad to leave them.

Kids of a young age, while often squeamish, will one hopes become inquisitive as they get older. Yet I often witness quite the reverse. I've frequently found, with all types of kids, but more in urban society, that to be adventurous or to ask questions is to be a smart arse; to enjoy something new, superior; while not knowing is failure. So better just keep quiet. In this edited world of aspiration and success, failure particularly seems to rock confidence in a way it should not. What a shame, as Christ only knows how many disasters I've cooked over time. So I think it important, outside any hilarity, to share such catastrophes.

That cooking is no longer taught in schools I find madness. Cooking is a life skill. If you can't cook, you are not a grown up and that's that. Self-sufficiency not dial-up convenience.

Teach computer sciences, teach Mandarin and Spanish, teach them to look after their money, teach them that their wits, charm, manners and common sense will get them further than they ever used too, but don't leave out cooking. Just call it Nature and Flames, as who wants to sign up for Home Economics?

'How do you spell satsuma?' asks my son, as he pens out his Christmas list for Santa.

'Why?' I ask.

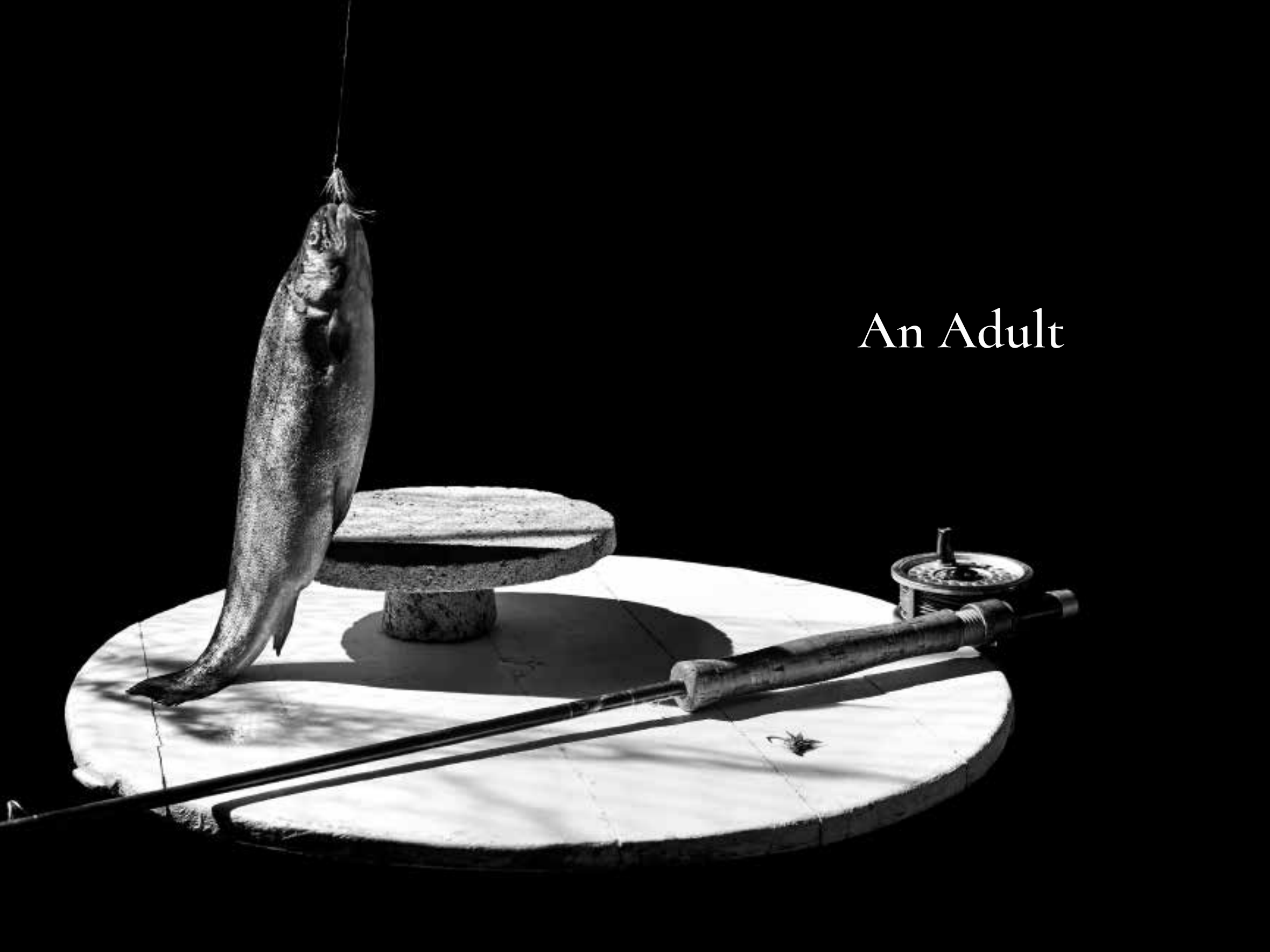
'Because I want to tell him please can he not put one in my stocking.'

My children live in the Spanish Pyrenees, where cooking is a large part of everyday life. Their mother insists they sit at the table to eat three times a day. I agree with this. They live in an almond orchard where last week the farmer unloaded a boar he'd shot. They are growing up to the sound of sheep bells. So I will not worry yet.

## Crumbed Bone Marrow

To my delight, I found bone marrows in Waitrose. Supermarket equals 'accessible' – a word I dislike as it tends to make all books and recipes supermarket driven, but hey ho!

An Adult



## A Peculiar Stance in Underpants

Shortly after my father died I returned to Dorset. I drove from London straight to the cemetery, and sat with my back against his gravestone eating a cheese and pickle sandwich and a packet of crisps. I was there for some time and, on rising, felt my gloom might be alleviated by a trip to the pub. I called a friend and there we sat consuming pint after pint of cider, punctuated with shots of Golden Cap whisky (not a recommended combination).

Although the chat was constant and cheery enough, my state of gloom returned with pint five.

My usual inclination, in such a state, is to think under the moon and roam in darkness across the fields. This time I chose to go home and sleep.

The vultures were sure enough hopping at my bedpost the following morning. I went down to breakfast in my boxer shorts, missing my father and filled with jangling discontentment. On glancing out the window, I was suddenly overtaken by the strangest urge to shock my hangover and mood from their very skin.

Returning the butter and eggs to the fridge, I walked straight from the front door of my sister's cottage into a large bed of healthy, muscular stinging nettles. I roamed around this small bushy space that I be vigorously bitten and my God, I was, legs burning as if I'd climbed into a laundry basket of wasps.

I guess I was simply trying to shake the illness that comes from pub work and chase out the oddness I generally felt over the weeks since my father had died. A hardline approach, I know.

My plan on nettle-patch exit couldn't have been clearer, directing me quickly into jeans and then into the car for an excruciating drive to West Bay beach.

Here, I immediately stripped and dashed into the cold sea.

Pleasure and pain produced the most extraordinary and uplifting fizzing in my legs, amplified by the cold salt water and goose bumps.

Equivalent to attempting a whole can of icy cold Coca-Cola in one go, I felt a similar carbonation overload in my legs rather than in the back of

the throat. It quickly flushed out my hangover, like a heavy animal from thick brush, and I remained hopping in the waist-high shallows until only a sensational faint tingling buzz remained.

Smiling, I was clear headed. Exhilarated in fact.

I have revisited this hangover cure in happier times since, and in smaller nettle patches that can be found nearer the sea.

Dare I recommend this cure for the foolish? Highly!

(Note: don't substitute the sea for a cold bath, it does not work.)

## Pleasure and Pain Soup

This is best made with nettle tops picked in the early spring months. Use gloves unless otherwise inclined. Try to pick leaves only, not stalk, and wash them thoroughly in cold very salty water, rinse well and repeat. If I want to luxuriate this soup, I add a dollop of crème fraîche to the bowl.

**Serves 2, with crusty bread**

30 g/1 oz/2 tbsp butter, plus extra for frying, if needed

1 medium onion, finely chopped

12 quail eggs

1 good, pert, garlic clove

250 g/9 oz stinging nettle tops, rinsed (see above)

300 ml/10 fl oz/1¼ cups good, tasty chicken stock

Generous scratching of nutmeg

2 rashers of smoked streaky bacon (optional)

1 tbsp large porridge oats (optional)

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Melt the butter over a low to medium heat and sweat the onions until very soft. Stir often, don't let them colour, and cook until meltingly tender. This will take about 8–12 minutes.

While the onions cook, place the quail eggs in a small pan filled with just enough cold water to cover them. Bring water to a boil over a high heat. Once boiling, count to 25 and immediately drain them before plunging the eggs into a bowl of cold water. Get them cooled quickly then drain again and peel. Crack them thoroughly by rolling them on a work surface under slight pressure. This will help the skin come away on peeling.

Stir the garlic into the onions and cook for a further minute or so. Add the nettle tops and cook for approximately 5 minutes or until tender, but still bright green.

Add the stock and bring to a simmer. Allow to cool slightly, then blitz in a blender or food processor until totally smooth.

Reheat if needs be. Season with nutmeg, salt and a good bombardment of pepper. Pop the desired number of quail eggs in to the soup and gobble the rest at a later date, dusted with celery salt.

If further garnishes are required, while the nettles cook, fry the bacon with the porridge oats in a dash of butter until the bacon and oats are browned and crispy. Drain off fat on paper towels and scatter over the soup and eggs.

## Taking the Paper

I was in less than a good mood. My breakfast had been ruined on finding two newspaper articles that had swelled my despair for both the animal kingdom and mankind.

In one, I learnt of a six-inch long, Barbie-pink slug called a Kaputar slug. I never knew such a splendid slug existed, and was sad to learn that, while it

resides on a single mountain in Australia (Mount Kaputar) it also resides on a list of forty other critically endangered species.

Bizarre as this creature was, without doubt it served some crucial employment under mother nature's bequest.

Thumbing to a nearby page, flicking from famine to Epicurean dog food, a story of total inconsequence: Sinitta and Simon Cowell's relationship or diet or some such.

I have no room for this, I thought.

Closing the papers, I headed out food shopping for a change of scene and mood.

In the veg section of my local Co-op, small joy came in a reduced-price bunch of dill slapped with a bright orange sticker, REDUCED!

The dill was vibrant and bushy, no reflection of its use-by date, or sell-by date or lurid warning. At the till, I'm told that, despite the label, the scanner reading means the dill must be handed in for destruction and the reduced offer has, in fact, expired.

Destruction is such a strong word.

'Just let me buy it anyway,' I say.

'I can't do that,' the checkout girl replied. 'It has to be handed in.'

I wonder what she was like at school.

'Why? So you can destroy a perfectly healthy bunch of dill? Can you see anything wrong with it?'

'I wouldn't know what to look for,' she replied.

'So: it's been picked to be thrown away?' I ask. I've snatched the dill from the counter during this exchange.

'I'm going to have to get the manager,' she says.

'Great,' I reply.

'Just sell him the dill,' a voice chips in from behind. A small queue is waiting to pay. Supportive or exasperated, I can't tell. They can see I'm in for the long haul though.

The manager comes and I explain the situation to him. 'I still want the dill on the bill ... at the till.' He sees no humour. It meets with a dead look. 'It's pert, it's toned,' I continue, 'It's still happy, not so much as a drooping leaf of ill-health. No yellowing fronds, no withered tips; this is vigorous, teenage

dill, still loving life,' I put forward.

I do remember continuing into 'not going anywhere' and the words 'cold dead hands', but I don't remember at what point the manager snatched the dill back from my grasp.

'Why don't you just give me the dill and also pay me to take it away?' I suggest with flaring nostrils

'Give him the bloody dill, I need to get home,' a local tattoo enthusiast with a loaf of bread mutters.

'Will you go if the dill goes with you?' I'm finally asked.

'Yes, that's only been my intention for the last ten minutes.'

On the way out, a lady in a headscarf clutching her wallet and the *Daily Mail* in one hand, cigarettes and car keys in the other, taps me with her one free bony finger and says, 'You did well, I completely agree with you.'

I thank her and follow it with 'You should give that up ...'

'Too late to stop now,' she laughs with a wheeze, shaking a jingly-jangly full hand of keys and fags.

'Puff away', I say to her. 'I meant the paper.'

## Phone Manner

Touch screens are complicated. Having a nose and chin like Punch, I tend to inadvertently exit a call with a brush of either.

I have also realized a passive-aggressive tendency to start eating crunchy things like apples and tortilla chips once certain conversations are underway, more likely to crunch more at points when I do not like what I'm hearing.

It gets worse. I've been busted taking a conference call from the bath.

I do, however, seem to conscientiously place a strategic flannel before such calls. I also eat crunchy things in the bath.

## Shoal

Many tides ago, I was at a Save the Ocean event in London. All the great and the good were there, environmentalists, chefs, philanthropists, marine biologists, journalists, authors, sashaying celebrities and an otherwise glitzy rent-a-crowd. All gathered, the volume was high in what was no less than an amazing marine theatre set. Replica polystyrene tuna fishes and sea creatures hung from the ceiling, while below the guests picked at trays of sustainable canapés like shoals of exotic fish pecking at coral.

Two women beside me were standing next to some fish tanks. Obsessed by each other's clothes and stroking each other's sequins in studied, pouting admiration. One turned to me and said, 'Don't you think she looks beautiful?'

Never being one who likes to be pushed towards a desired answer I replied, 'In truth, I think the colourful fish behind you are far better dressed.'

They looked me up and down with flaring nostrils and slid away.

Immediately behind me I heard, 'Darling, do you know what this event is for?' and turned to see a smartly dressed couple jiggling away to the music.

'Some sea thingy,' came her reply, followed by, 'I've had enough, shall we go and get some sushi?'

Like laughing into a snorkel and mask it went wrong, and snorting Champagne all down my shirt, I was met with another frosty stare.

The pelagic wanderer, I'd taken my fill of this super shoal. I flicked my tail and headed to a friend's house for baked potato and beans.