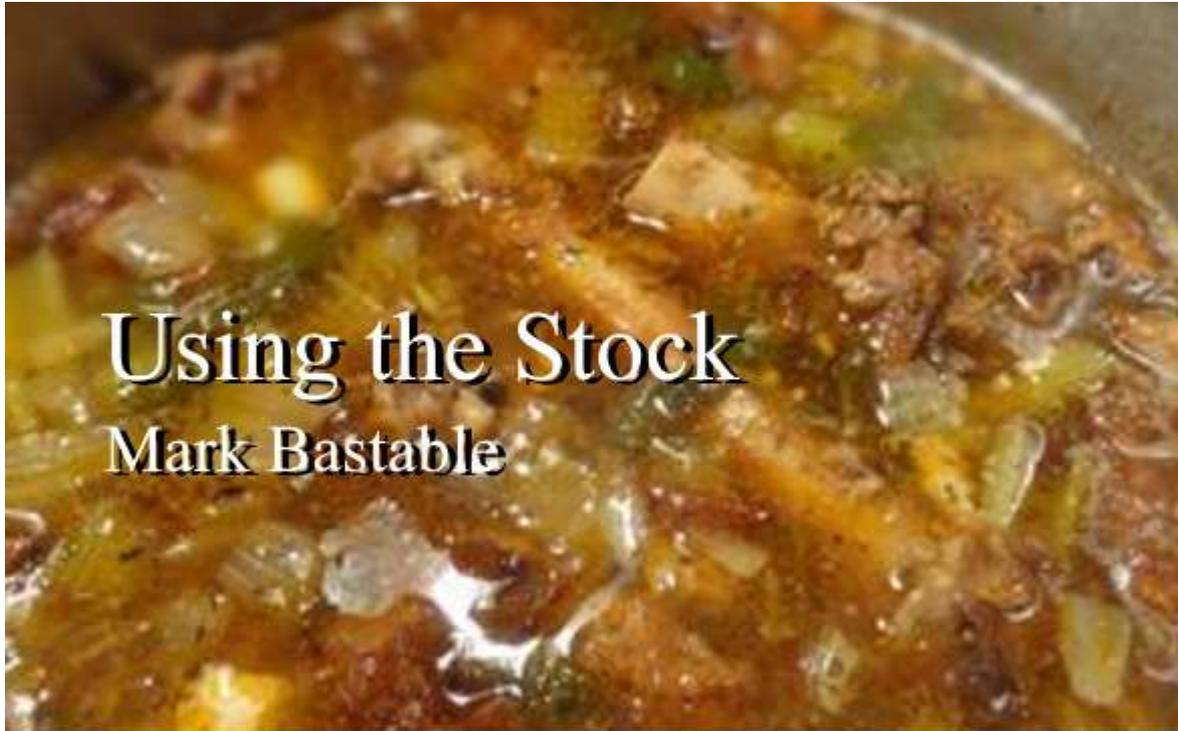


THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable



The stuff in my freezer, Jess – really. I don't know why I've kept a lot of it. Some of it I don't even know what it is.

The things that Martin put in here all have labels. There are neat Tupperware boxes marked 'Blackberries Oct 16', 'Turkey Madras Dec 17'. 'Winter stew (beef) Jan 17'. We never get round to using any of the food we freeze, but at least with his you know what it is you're wasting.

The not-quite-enoughs are irritating. A twisted bag of petit-pois – I'd guess there's about thirty peas in there. I think this is cookie dough - not enough to be worth defrosting. Breaded calamari, but not quite enough for two people.

And down here at the bottom, there are three or four ziplock bags of homemade stock. Couple of them are chicken. This one here – it's lamb.

"Oh, that's a lovely shoulder of lamb, Poppy," Mum said as I was unpacking the shopping. "What you want to do with that is pierce it with a knife and push fresh garlic and rosemary in. It'll cook up lovely."

"Actually, Martin was going to do a Moroccan thing."

“Oh, no, no, dear. No-one likes that. Rosemary and garlic – that’s what you want to do with lamb.”

Martin, opening a bottle of wine, gave his ‘fine by me’ shrug, so I knew that we were going to end up eating garlic-and-rosemary roast lamb whether I liked it or not. Which was irritating, because I’d enjoyed googling recipes with Mart the previous night and deciding on the Moroccan thing.

Mum buzzed around as the cooking was going on, commenting.

“Oh, Martin, you’re a dab hand with that knife, aren’t you? Isn’t he good, Poll?”

I looked up from the Sunday supplement. Martin was chopping carrots.

“Don’t know how he does it,” I said.

“It’s a gift,” Martin said.

“So do you do most of the cooking during the week, Martin?” Mum asked him

“No, no – we take turns.”

Not true, actually. Martin’s good at cooking and he enjoys it. I’m not and I don’t, as everyone in the family knows. But it was nice of him not to give Mum an in.

“Well, with you both working, that’s probably the best way,” Mum said. “It was different in my day. Polly’s dad always wanted his dinner on the table at seven-thirty, didn’t he, Poll?”

I went to the fridge and got the wine. “Top up?” I asked Mart. “Another sherry, Mum?”

“You just need to slice the garlic, Martin, not mince it. Just slice it and push the slices into the holes.”

“Oh – the door. That’ll be Jess.”

You brought late dahlias, do you remember? And champagne. I think we’ve still got the champagne.

“Hello, darling,” I said. “Ooh - nice hat.”

“Thank you. I’ve got very into hats lately,” you said, as you took off your coat. “How’s it going?”

“She’s only been here since yesterday, and I’m already climbing the walls.”

“It’s just a couple of days. I’m going to have her for the whole of Christmas week.”

You know what – I think that champagne’s in the fridge in the garage. I’m going to sit here and clear out the freezer while drinking bubbly. How decadent is that?

I’m back, with a glass of champagne. Where was I?

Ah – that Sunday.

I remember Mum was very impressed by the gravy.

“Lovely gravy, Martin. Just right!”

“I got the recipe from Jess’s book.”

You laughed. “I just jazzed up Mum’s method with a splash of port.”

Oh, she was pleased about that. And I was a bit miffed. It was as if you and she and Mart were all in a fun little club that I was excluded from. I always have been, really.

Mum and I could talk books, of course, but that’s just sharing reports of a solitary pursuit. Agreeing that Maeve Binchy’s novels are under-rated isn’t quite the same as working together all afternoon on a paella, like you and Mum did. I sometimes wonder whether I was uninterested in cooking because I wasn’t as good at it as you, or vice versa. Either way, I certainly wasn’t going to compete. I knew how that would turn out, and who’d be announcing the winner.

Sometimes Mum’d be round here when your show was on. She’d give a running commentary of course. Everything she approved of was down to her – “That’s how you chop an onion. I remember teaching her to do that.’ – and the things she didn’t approve of were an aberration all of your own – “What’s the point of that zizzing thing? By the time you’ve set it up and plugged it in and washed it up afterwards, you might as well have just used a good knife.”

I’d sit there biting the inside of my cheeks.

Another glass of champagne, I think.

Anyway, the deal with Martin and me is that whichever of us doesn’t cook clears up. So I clear up a lot, which I don’t mind a bit. That Sunday, when I started ferrying dishes to the kitchen, Mum insisted on helping – and there was absolutely no point telling her not to, as you know.

I scraped the plates and stacked them. Then I opened the bin to tip the lamb bone in there – and she practically shrieked.

“No, Poll! No, no, no. Don’t throw it away! That’ll make a lovely stock! You don’t waste bones like that.”

“Mum, I’ll never do it. It doesn’t matter.”

“Then I’ll do it! You’ve got leftover carrots here, and green beans. And there’s still a lot of meat on that bone.”

“Mum – look.” I pulled open the door of the freezer and pointed to the bottom shelf. “See? Two lots of chicken stock you insisted on making last time from the bones. Just taking up space.”

“I don’t know where you get this wasteful attitude, I’m sure. You don’t remember how tough things were when you were little.”

“Well, maybe not. But things are not tough now.” I was getting into one of my dramas – I could hear myself. “And through sheer bloody hard work, I’ve got myself to a position where I don’t need to boil up leftovers. You know what? Yesterday I threw out an entire trout that was only three days past its best-by.”

She had taken the dish with the bone in it, and was clucking over it as if it were a neglected infant.

“Look at this. Lovely. Some herbs, veggies. Make a lovely stock. It can be simmering while we tidy up.”

I turned, fists clenched, and there you were, leaning in the doorway with a glass of red. You did that little pout that means, “Is it really worth arguing about?” When the three of us were together, you ended up doing that a lot

Mum noticed you there too. “Look at this bone, Jess. It’ll make a lovely stock – tell her.”

I had to argue my corner, naturally. “Jess, really – I wouldn’t know what to do with it even if I had it.”

“Cawl,” you said.

“What?”

“Cawl. It’s a Welsh lamb casserole. Nanny Evans used to make it.”

“Oh, heavens,” Mum said. “Cawl! I haven’t thought of that in years. Yes, my mam made a lovely cawl.”

“As if I’m going to do that,” I said, pouring you another glass of wine, and topping mine up.

“I’ll come round. We can do it together.”

I smiled. As always, you’d given everyone a way out. “Good idea. When?”

“Soon as possible, I think,” you said, touching your glass against mine.

“Oh, yes – that’ll be nice,” Mum said. “The two of you. Lovely.”

“No, no,” you said. “You too, Mum. All three of us.”

And I was annoyed you said that – which I’m very ashamed of now.

If I’m honest, these last few years I haven’t gone out of my way to see a lot of Mum. I mean, I’ve always been dutiful. I wasn’t neglectful or offhand. But I didn’t seek out time with her.

Now, though – now – I think about her a lot, and I find I want to see her constantly. Grief completely alters your priorities. Some of the things that one newly wants to do, one starts doing. But some things it’s too late to do, however much one wants to.

So I’m sitting here on the kitchen floor, surrounded by defrosting food, most of which I’ll throw away. I’m going to need the freezer space for about two gallons of cawl. And in my lap I’m

holding the lamb stock Mum made that Sunday, which we'll use this afternoon. My tears are dripping onto the frosted plastic. I'm sobbing.

Oh – and there's the doorbell. That'll be Mum. We're going to make the cawl together, Jess, to feed all the people who come back here after the service next week. Mum and I cooking together – imagine! I'm going to enjoy doing that with her – really I am.

But – oh, Jess – I wish, I wish there had been time to do it with you.