

## The List

Snežana Ćurčić

The only time that I can remember barking at my father was when he first mentioned 'The List'. 'Are you serious? I've barely arrived in Belgrade after a long time away and you are already asking me something like that. Have some mercy and let me enjoy being at home!' I poured out in one breath.

My father went quiet and appeared confused. All he had asked me to do was to write a wish list of home-made delicacies I'd like to take back with me to my new home in England. He was an old-school man with the mind of a strategist. He and my mother needed to know what produce to source, what dishes to prepare, and how to pack it all in time. Proper Serbian cuisine could not be found anywhere else, my parents thought, and I didn't rush to correct them. So they gathered together *ajvar*, *sarma* and, my favourite of all, *burek*. *Burek* is an indescribably tasty cheese savoury pastry shaped into a spiral. *Ajvar*, a roasted red pepper spread, is often referred to as the vegan caviar of the Balkans.

When she was preparing items for The List, my mother would morph into the main character from one of my favourite movies, *Babette's Feast*. Like Babette, she would pirouette around the cooker, preparing the most lavish meals. It was her generous way of protecting me and my young family abroad. The kitchen would be quickly converted into a military headquarters, the table piled with knives, scissors, pots and lesser-known kitchen utensils. My parents were also getting increasingly creative and resourceful with the packing materials. Nothing was thrown away that could be re-purposed: ice-cream containers, yoghurt tubs and cola bottles with Fanta caps.

Over the years, I gradually gave in to The List and became a full-blown accomplice. After all, there was enough food to last for at least a week upon my return to London. The List was like an extended spoon, stretching out our time of being together. It was our family code, a sign language and a ritual.

On one occasion, I landed at Heathrow airport, loaded like a mule, my worn-out Samsonite brimming with Serbian delights. As I strolled towards the 'nothing to declare' exit, I spotted a customs officer raising a hand and nodding at me to stop for a random luggage check.

My heart high-jumped with shock; my mind sprinted through the inventory in my suitcase. I had The List, but then the officer presented his own. His was a laminated sheet showing pictures and description of items that were banned from being brought into the UK, including rough diamonds; foreign, prison-made goods; firearms and ammunition; torture equipment; invasive alien species; drugs; and indecent and obscene material.

'I hope not to find any of those,' the official said.

'No, of course not,' I muttered, praying for a twist in this nightmarish movie plot.

With his hands in white latex gloves, he rummaged through my stuff and pulled out a package secured with brown sellotape, marked in black pen with my father's neat writing in Cyrillic. Then, like a magician producing rabbits from a hat, the officer pulled out one package after another.

'What is this?'

'Um, well, my parents insisted on giving me a little something for the road.'

'Like what?'

'Home-cooked *sarma*, for instance, made with pickled cabbage leaves stuffed with meat. You know, I am not very good at making it, and also you can't find it here,' I rambled.

'Are you aware that it is strictly forbidden to bring meat or dairy products into the UK to prevent disease, unless they are pre-packed?'

My embarrassment went through the high airport roof when he asked me to take the rest of the food out and place it into a container. I felt like a suspect from a most-wanted list. He didn't go into much explanation, but loudly pressed a big stamp across the page of my passport instead. The words included a note of hefty fines and even a prison sentence if I was ever caught again.

'For now, I am giving you a warning. All the details are there.'

I have no idea what possessed me, but I quietly tried my luck.

'Excuse me, sir, is there any chance I take that package with vegetarian *ajvar* with me? Just this time, please.'

The officer stonewalled me without even looking at me.

In a single sweep, my List of Love, into which my mother and father packed all their worries and care, was cancelled by The List of Law, for good.

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Snežana Ćurčić is a journalist, a radio reporter and a researcher. Originally from Belgrade, Serbia, she now divides her time between the UK and Greece. Her ever-present passion for travel has taken her around the world, reporting extensively for *BBC World Service* and *Somewhere on Earth: The Global Tech Podcast*.

Her work has also been published in the *Financial Times*. The focus of her writing and research is cultural, social, human, technological and green issues. Snežana speaks Serbian, English, Russian and Greek.

A recording of this piece can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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