When I was young, food was going to be eradicated. In 1975, when Queen made the first music video and British women (like my mum) were given the right to equal pay (but, also like my mum, not the equal pay itself), futuristic TV dramas like UFO and Space 1999 showed a meal that was no more than a pill, popped on the tongue and swallowed by elegant, mini-skirted women with silver eye makeup and purple hair. The earthy, or earthly, business of chewing and digesting (and, presumably, excreting) would be wiped out, like smallpox and open sewers. This was the future, and I looked forward to the purple hair and elegant “moonlashes,” which were as silver as the skirts and about the same length.

My enthusiasm was based on domestic logic: I would not have to cook or wash up dishes, ergo, I would have plenty of time to deal with my silver accoutrements, and with invading aliens keen to harvest my food-free organs.

The future began to move into the present with almost indecent haste—UFO was still in its first TV season when the first space food arrived. It was called Smash. Smash required only the addition of boiling water to convert from pure white potato meteors to mashed potatoes; it was advertised on television by robots from space who mocked our primitive behavior in peeling, boiling, and mashing the humble tuber when all we needed to do was open a packet.

I watched my mother prepare Smash a couple of times a week, avid not so much for the transformation of the food as the impending transformation of the parent. I hoped to catch her in the interim stages: moonlashes emerging from the straight black roots of her original ones, or skirts receding up her legs in a silvery outgoing tide. To my disappointment her hair didn’t even develop a hint of purple.

The removal of boring terrestrial food from our diets didn’t happen either. Over three decades on from extraterrestrial Smash we have reversed our trajectory, falling back into an ever closer orbit around the earthy, necessarily chewable foods we once thought would be abolished. In fact, so obsessed are we with the provenance of our foodstuffs that even international transport is frowned upon, let alone interplanetary transfer. I am no longer disappointed by this failure to achieve nutritional liftoff, because it was my generation that was experimented on in the name of future (and futuristic) food, with unexpected and unattractive consequences.

I must admit that some of the experimentation was fun: Space Dust was a sweet, granular in form, that exploded
in the mouth, battering the soft palate with chemical force. It was said that the right combination of Space Dust and carbonated drink (variously claimed to be Coke, Tizer, R. Whites Lemonade, or Lucozade) would blow your tonsils right off. I’d had mine removed, aged six, so could not take a full part in the experiments, and can’t now remember why we thought explosive tonsillectomies would be a good idea. But we proved beyond doubt that a well-shaken fizzy drink plus a goodly mouthful of Space Dust would unfailingly cause the bubbling mixture to rise up the sinuses passages and flood down the nose to horrific visual effect.

Space Dust was followed by the powdered orange juice Rise’n’Shine. I realize now the name referred to happy morning behavior, but at the time I took it as an invitation to escape our planet’s gravity and shine like “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” Anyway, it looked beguiling in the advertisements, where it promised the instantaneous taste of tropical oranges via mundane tap water and the application of a spoon, so we children begged and nagged our mothers to buy it. The adverts lied. Nine times out of ten Rise’n’Shine clumped into ugly orange reefs around the base of the glass and delivered only repellently flavored water. It was like drinking laundry soap, with the occasional tongue-searing clot of soggy powder that burned the gums like caustic soda.

Worst of all, though, in the era of food that wasn’t food-like was TVP. It wasn’t exactly advertised; it appeared on adult TV programs of impeccable intellectual pedigree like Tomorrow’s World (the future, but for grownups and without moonlashes or mini-skirts) or the Six O’Clock News, and that alerted us, the tomorrow generation, that this wasn’t going to be a “fun” food.

TVP was shown in vats, like pale grey porridge. It was invented by the Japanese, a fiendish nation who, according to my father, were already taking over the world by means of electronic typewriters and calculators. Finally, and worst of all, TVP was going to be the food that fed the starving of India, but not by being shipped out to them for their dinners—in fact, it was going to be cunningly hidden in our dinners, and the meat it replaced would be given to them. So, at least, I understood the scenario, and so too did many of my schoolfriends, who took to raising already unidentifiable pieces of meat on their forks and demanding of the teacher on duty: “Is this TVP, Miss, is it? ‘Cos I’m not eating it, if it is. You can send it to India ‘cos they don’t care.”

The starving Indians were already our collective bane—at school or home, any food left uneaten was garnished with the unappetizing statement that “the poor starving children in India would be glad of that.” The generous suggestion that it should therefore be sent to them immediately was condemned as “ungrateful cheek.” It could be difficult to respect the adult world when its response to the imminent arrival of space-age nourishment was to tell you that it couldn’t even manage to send your unwanted dinner to somewhere as nearby as India. The starving of Africa had not yet emerged to trouble our collective consciences—nor had the idea that we in the West contributed to their terrible condition—and it seemed to us preteens that the space-pill meal couldn’t come soon enough. When it did, the starving Indians and our inept parents would presumably both disappear and we’d be able to stay up as late as we liked, as the sun never sets in space, and we wouldn’t need to brush our teeth before bed—why should we, when we’d only taken a pill?

When TVP actually arrived on our school lunch plates we did not need to ask questions. It made itself known as a vaguely spongy, dubiously glistening presence that tried to harmonize with minced or chopped beef but gave itself away by rising to the surface of every dish as if it contained tiny flotation tanks. It exuded vast amounts of gravy when pressed with a fork, before bouncing back into its original shape in a way that real meat never could. Also, it tasted of nothing. Chewing TVP was like eating greasy cushion stuffing.

The sinister TVP was the last of the nonfood foods inflicted on us. Convenience turned out to have a cost. There were more stories on the Six O’Clock News about starving children—but they turned out to be us! Somehow the Food from Space had left us nutritionally deprived, attention deficient, and full of dangerous chemicals.

We youngsters huddled together, clutching our packets and bottles of tartrazine-packed, additive-enriched, unnatural food, expecting at any moment to be corralled into some kind of kid quarantine, or maybe, just to fall apart as a result of our terrible diets. It came as a surprise to many of us that we survived into adulthood with most of our faculties, if not our teeth, intact.

Today my family eats potatoes grown in our own garden, buys smallholder-raised free-range meat, and drinks locally grown and pressed apple juice to reduce our carbon footprint. Smash is relegated to the cheapest supermarkets, and Rise’n’Shine has disappeared altogether. As for Space Dust, its constituent E-numbers have mainly been outlawed.

Only TVP, least loved of all the space-age foods, has survived into the mainstream modern diet, but now it appears in its raw-food state, emerging as the new “natural superfood” edamame, rather than the old “unnatural space food” Textured Soya Protein. So the Japanese won the space race after all.