



I don't know why, but I have suddenly turned into the type of person who gets invited to stay for Christmas. Various households have offered me a spare bed and a place at the festive table. I am not noted for my wildly extrovert nature and have not attempted to tell a joke since I was 13, so why I should now be regarded as an asset to anyone's Yuletide celebrations is a mystery to me.

Could it be something to do with the fact that I am now a professional cook? Savages, the restaurant where I work, does not have turkey on its menu for Christmas. Savage, the owner, once had a bad experience with a 20lb turkey in a field in Norfolk.

He wouldn't go into the details, but he said to me, "They can't slaughter enough of the ugly feathered buzzards, as far as I'm concerned." However, he refuses to have one on his premises, dead or alive. So I have never actually cooked a turkey yet, or any other kind of Christmas bird.

I have narrowed down my list of invitations and come up with a short list of three:

One: Pandora in Oxford

Two: My mother in Leicester

Three: My fiancée Jo-Jo's mother in Nigeria.

Reluctantly, Jo-Jo and I decided to strike Nigeria off the list. We've only got four days off work and Nigeria seems rather a long way to go just to give Jo-Jo's mother a lambswool scarf and a basket of Body Shop skin-care gunk. We considered visiting Pandora and her ancient lover, Professor Jack Cavendish, who are holding open house on Christmas Day. But I pointed out to Jo-Jo that though Pandora had always been generous with alcohol, she is less generous with food.

We would be lucky to get more than a bowl of Twiglets and a few olives. Jo-Jo is a tall woman and has a very hearty appetite. I telephoned my mother last night. She started to panic and said, "My God! What do Nigerians eat? Mealies?" I pointed out that Jo-Jo would be happy to eat a slice of Melton pork pie and a chunk of Red Leicester cheese. This mollified my mother slightly. She then went on to ask if Jo-Jo and I were sleeping together. I answered,

"That's none of your business, Mother." My mother snapped, "Actually, it is my business. I need to know how many beds to make up. And if you're not sleeping together, it means your father's got to get the camping mattress out of the shed and blow it up and I've got to go out and buy a single duvet." She went on in a similar vein for quite some time. Eventually, mindful of my phone bill, I interrupted her by admitting that Jo-Jo and I were lovers and that our contribution to the Christmas festivities would be to bring a goose. "A goose!" shrieked my mother.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with a goose?" I needed no reminding, but she went on to say that she had never even cooked a turkey successfully. She either forgot to defrost it, burnt it, or left the giblets inside the plastic bag. I assured her that goose was the simplest thing in the world to cook, or so I had read. My mother said, "Well, you cook the creature, then," and put the phone down.

Jo-Jo, who had been listening in to this conversation, said, "I thought your mother sounded very vivacious." I replied: "Jo-Jo, don't be fooled by her vivacity. She is a complete neurotic, and she goes to pieces at Christmas. She had to be ejected from Marks and Spencer by the security men one Christmas Eve. She's pushed through the doors as they were closing at 5pm and run around like a turkey with its head cut off, snatching at socks and boxer shorts and boxes of pot pourri.

"It was one of the worst moments of my life," I said, recalling in my mind's eye my tearful mother as she was kindly but firmly led towards the exit door, and the wire basket was taken from her grasping fingers. "Is that why you do your Christmas shopping in August?" asked Jo-Jo.

"Yes," I replied. Then I put my coat on and went out to collect the goose. We left London at 5am on Christmas morning. Jo-Jo drove down the M1 like a woman pursued by demons. I sat in the back seat with the plucked goose. Both the goose and I were wearing seat belts.

We arrived outside my parents' house in Leicester at 7.32am. There were no lights on and it took ten minutes of banging before my father opened the door. He was barefoot and wearing a ripped-at the neck T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts. He was unshaven and his hair looked like a startled lavatory brush. He was not an impressive sight. I introduced Jo-Jo to him. He looked up at her in wonderment and ushered us inside.

"Your mother didn't get to bed until five this morning," he said. "She was wrapping presents at two, cleaning the house at three, and making mince pies at four." "So that explains the smell of burning," I said. "Yes," he said, yawning and displaying several large cavities in his teeth. "I came downstairs and found the poor cow asleep with her head on the half-iced Christmas cake."

I looked out of the lounge window at the back garden and saw a flock of birds on the lawn, eating what looked like the remains of the blackened

mince pies. Jo-Jo glanced curiously around the room. A straggly Christmas tree stood in the corner, decorated with green plastic wire, to which were attached lights in the shape of coach lamps.

A rag-bag of decorations were hung in a haphazard manner along the thin branches. I tried to adjust the fairy on the top, which was lurching dangerously to the left, but, as I did so, a shower of pine needles fell from the tree and were caught up in the shag-pile carpet below. Paper chains had been hung diagonally across the ceiling, but two had lost their drawing pins and were swaying dangerously close to the gas fire.

I went out to the car and returned with the goose. My father said, "Big breast," and patted it admiringly, then went upstairs to wake my mother and my sister Rosie. I took the goose into the kitchen and started to prepare it for the oven. I had prepared the prune and apple stuffing the night before; it took only moments to stuff it into the cavities and close the flaps.

My mother came downstairs in her old towelling dressing gown. I pointed out to her that the belt was missing.

She coughed on her cigarette and said, "I used it as a temporary lead, but the dog jumped over the gate and came back without it." I glanced down at the dog, which was lying under the kitchen table.

It didn't look capable of movement, let alone the athleticism required to jump over our gate. My mother said, "I'm hoping your father has bought me a new one." "A new dog?" I shouted.

"No, a new dressing gown, fool!" she said. I took her through to the lounge and introduced her to JoJo, who was adjusting the paper chains without the benefit of a ladder. Jo-Jo kissed my mother and my mother kissed her back and I saw at once that my mother had captivated yet another of my girlfriends. My mother then announced that Bert Baxter had been invited for the day. Would I go round and wheel him to our house? I was horrified!

Would I never be free of that dirty, foul-mouthed old man? I kept quiet, but I resolved to have nothing to do with his disgusting toe-nails. If the Government can't arrange to cut them, so be it. His yellow talons are certainly not my responsibility. My mother didn't get her new dressing gown. My father had bought her three aprons and a hand whisk. She said "Thank you, George," and smiled, but she had murder in her eyes.

I put on one of her aprons and went to baste the goose. There seemed to be rather a lot of fat in the pan. When I was back into the living room, I found Jo-Jo and my mother laughing at the present I had bought for Jo-Jo: a turquoise satin basque undergarment. "Don't you like it?" I asked. Jo-Jo said, "I am 5ft 11in tall, my measurements are 40-28-38. This basque is three sizes too small."

"They never get it right," said my mother bitterly, as she unwrapped a pair of extra-large knickers from my father. At 10 o'clock, I reluctantly left the house and walked round to collect Bert Baxter. He was sitting by the window wearing his cap, waiting for me. Apart from a sprig of plastic holly over the photograph of Queenie, his dead wife, there was nothing in his house to indicate that it was Christmas.

It was like Siberia inside his living room. I said, "Why haven't you got your gas fire on?" Baxter shouted, "I ain't a flippin' millionaire. I can't eat and keep warm." As we turned the corner of our street, I saw a large Volvo estate pull up outside our house and Pandora and her lover, Jack Cavendish, get out. To be followed by Ivan and Tania Braithwaite.

The front door opened and my mother, now dressed in a short black frock and with Rosie's present, a pair of reindeer antlers, on her head, greeted them with excited cries. Apparently, Pandora had cancelled her "At Home" and had gone to her parents for Christmas instead. However, the Braithwaites' electricity had failed and they had thrown themselves on my mother's mercy. After the greetings were over and Pandora's champagne had been opened, Bert gave me a present.

It was a pair of toe-nail clippers. "If you wouldn't mind, lad," he said, reaching down to take his evil-smelling socks off. When I had completed the horrible task and thrown away the shards, I went to have a look at the goose. Would it feed ten? It was shrinking at an alarming rate. The pan was now full of fat.

I was about to pour it away when I was called into the living room to watch a demonstration of Rosie's new urinating and defecating doll. I was disgusted, and said so. Pandora drawled, "At least Rosie won't grow up an anal-retentive, like you." I withdrew to the kitchen and prepared the chipolatas, roast potatoes, carrots, red baked cabbage, petit pois, mangetout, Brussels sprouts and bread sauce.

I strained the liquid from the giblets, then announced that lunch would be ready in three-quarters of an hour, and would somebody please find the extra leaf to the dining table. I asked my father to light a fire. "Can't," he said drunkenly. "That chimney smokes more than I do." They all laughed. "I don't care," I said.

"I am determined to have a proper, Dickensian, Christmas fire for once in my life." At five minutes to two, I had a panic attack. How would I manage to get everything cooked on time and keep it hot and warm the serving dishes and ten plates on my mother's pathetic stove?

Her equipment was a disgrace: three saucepans, a burnt milk pan and a sieve were all I could lay my hands on. I was about to check on the goose and drain some of the fat away when I was called into the living room to hear Professor Cavendish reciting from Dickens's A Christmas Carol.

Smoke billowed from the fire-place and his recitation seemed to go on for hours, but eventually, he came towards the end:

"There was a breathless pause as Mrs. Cratchit, looking slowly all along the carving knife, prepared to plunge it into the breast; but when she did and the long expected gush of stuffing issued forth, one murmur of delight arose all around the board, and even Tiny Tim beat on the table with the handle of his knife and feebly cried, 'Hurrah!' There never was such a goose."

There was never such a goose in our house, either. I went back into the kitchen to find smoke and flames licking around the oven door. I managed to turn the gas off and get some wet towels from upstairs to drape over the front of the oven.

Then I ordered everybody out of the house and called the fire brigade. By the time they'd arrived, the flames had died down. So it was safe enough to go back in and survey the damage. My mother was still wearing the reindeer antlers on her head. "It's not too bad," she said, looking around. Then she slipped on some goose fat on the floor and pulled me down with her. I suppose if you have to go to a hospital casualty unit with a broken leg, then Christmas Day is the day to do it.

The nurses were all wearing silly hats, so my mother's reindeer antlers caused hardly any comment at all. At 5.30pm I was wheeled on to an orthopaedic ward. At 7.30pm I begged all my visitors to stop laughing and leave me in peace. As they reached the double doors at the bottom of the ward, I felt contrite. "God bless you, everyone," I shouted, waving a crutch at them. Then, worried that they hadn't heard me, I shouted again, "God bless you, every one!"