

# Christmas Day 1997

I was feeling terribly glum. I'd somehow spurned the generous and cheerful invitations of many close friends and I was aimlessly wandering through the damp, narrow streets of my home town, in search of an elusive je ne sais quoi. It was 11 in the morning, on Christmas Day 1997.

I found myself approaching the stately gates of Mrs Turner, a woman whom I held in high regard but knew only slightly. Four years previously I had spent Christmas Day in the very same house and had enjoyed myself greatly. The day had been marked by an unhurried half hour of phenomenally charged sexual intercourse in an en suite with the woman's twin sister (not identical I'm sorry to say), whilst the rest of the guests chattered below.

I gazed briefly through the gates like a jailbird, but soon became fearful that someone might see me, and I scuttled off. I continued my tramping through the drizzle, wondering if it was evident that I had no purpose or destination. The streets were largely empty. Some cars rushed by and I exchanged suspicious glances with a few fellow pedestrians. I resisted with difficulty the temptation to eavesdrop on the comfortable laughter and conversations issuing from the festive homes I passed (comforting myself with the fact that the suicide and murder rates reached their bloody peaks at this time of the year).

I made my way to Central Park, hoping for a rest on a quiet bench with a view. It was a sorry sight, even more soiled than usual and, as I climbed the hill I saw everywhere the lacerating tracks of idiotic four wheel drivers. The latest sport of the cloddish masses, like pigs in the flower beds. The park was torn and bedraggled, the neat borders and smooth lawns a distant memory, the calm and serenity sliced and diced, the mindless fury still hanging in the air like exhaust fumes.

I reached the summit and sorrowfully surveyed the devastation.

There was nothing left in this town, no redeeming qualities, no sense of community, no elegance, no public beauty. Just jumped-up commoners careening around in ridiculous cars and clothes, not caring a whit about anything unless it was theirs. Selfish, greedy, stupid, grotesque, coarse, thoughtless loons. Worthless, pointless scum exemplified by the four-wheel driving hooligans and ruffians who tear around holding everything at poor second to their money-grubbing endeavours and their mindlessly hyperactive leisure activities.

They call it a "lifestyle" but they have no style and, if I had my way, they would have no life either.

I had been peering down at the town for some while when I heard a powerful engine approaching. I turned and saw an accursed four wheel drive bus (a "people mover" as the inane advertising would have it) grinding up the wide path. But the curses died on my lips when I saw Mrs Turner at the wheel with another woman, a stranger to me, beside her.

They were heading towards me and I hailed them. Mrs Turner didn't seem in the least part surprised to see me and offered me a lift. Without discussing a destination I happily accepted, opened the sliding door, hopped in and we were off, almost before I had a chance to buckle up.

Mrs Turner drove alarmingly fast but with great confidence. The two women sat in the front, chatting and laughing, as we travelled along increasingly narrow and slippery paths, whilst I gripped my seat rather tightly and wondered where we were heading. We left the park and then the empty town and soon were in a part of the surrounding countryside I had not visited before. Again Mrs Turner seemed drawn to twisting, convoluted tracks. As we crashed and grazed and lurched along Mrs Turner's friend screamed with excitement and I tried to keep myself from calling out in fear. Eventually we emerged from the undergrowth onto quite a respectable lane. We drove through a well kept village and Mrs Turner flashed a smile at me saying "Not long now."

I murmured something about lunch and both women laughed. More at me, I think, than with me, because I couldn't see anything funny in what I had said.

Then we were once again flying down a narrow track, brambles and twigs lashing at the windows, the sound of water, mud and stones hurtling up underneath us like some twisted car wash. I was once again considerably unmanned.

We stopped. The women sat. I peered ahead through the spattered windscreen and saw a gate bedecked with grim signs.

Danger. Condemned. Private. Do Not Enter. Trespassers will be shot.

Could you get the gate please said Mrs Turner, leaving just enough of a pause before her charming smile for me to realise that she didn't know my name.

I had no choice but I was afraid on many counts: of getting into trouble, of being left behind just for a joke (a fear I invariably have on the few occasions I open gates for vehicles to pass through (a fear I presume many people experience)), but most of all I had a burgeoning sense of dread, of events getting out of hand, of danger ahead, of suffering and perhaps death. What one might call a mild anxiety attack. But to cut a long story short, I opened the gate for Mrs Turner.

She didn't drive off and leave me stranded. She didn't even toy with me in the way some idiots do. She drove through, waited prettily for me to shut the gate and we set off again down the rough track.

We hurtled down hills, around corners, over humps. I had closed my eyes after we had passed the gate and I saw no reason to open them. Mrs Turner and her friend made what they imagined to be humorous comments and observations in attempt to make me gawp at the speeding scenery, but by then they had long since ceased to hold me in their thrall. I wanted the outing to get itself over with, I wanted to be back home with my feet up on the pouffe, painting over Mrs Turner's number in my address book with liquid paper.

We careened on, Mrs Turner squawked at her friend like a spoiled child and her imbecilic friend whinnied back. I held tight and waited. At last we came to a halt.

I listened to the women open their doors, get out and walk around. I heard water lapping over stones and birds tweeting miserably in damply rustling trees. I smelt cool, still air, redolent with decay and a faint waft of eucalypt oil. I felt my palms and the back of my neck cooling from the evaporation of perspiration.

I opened my eyes. The light from the grey sky above the tall, dripping trees only barely managing to insinuate itself down to the dim forest floor, the river sluggishly gurgled between slippery banks. The two women marched ahead, their screeching ringing awkwardly through the trees. I hurried after them, not wishing to be left alone in such a slimy place. Unfortunately, as I was soon to discover, our destination was to prove to be slimier still.

They squelched and stumbled along for a few minutes, with me threading along in their wake. Not for one moment did they stop their noise, their gossiping, prattling and guffawing. Then we arrived at a clearing and I was shocked to hear them fall silent.

We had come to a metal door, set in the side of a fern-festooned cliff. Instead of a handle it had a key pad that gently glowed red.

Mrs Turner put on a pair of rubber gloves (almost precisely the same as the ones I use for washing up except that hers were yellow), extracted a slip of paper from a pocket, consulted it and tapped in a lengthy code number.

The door hissed alarmingly and swung inwards, revealing a dim passage leading down to heaven knew where. The two women grimaced at each other and, without even looking at me, set off down the passage. I stood outside, uncertain, wondering how I could get home, mulling over my options. Then, with, I'm ashamed to say, something of a whimper, I hastened to catch them up. They did after all seem to know what they were doing and I was loath to be left alone. The door (of course) hissed again and closed itself with an clunk behind me.

I stumbled along, my eyes quickly becoming accustomed to the gloom. The low and slippery passage was barely lit by tiny glowing lights, strung erratically and sparingly along its length. The floor was roughly hewn rock or uneven planks covering pools of muddy water. Sometimes I was forced to splash and slide through mud and ooze, sometimes to duck under struts and girders. The women ahead of me appeared and disappeared as they strode in and out of the lights. I renewed my efforts and closed the gap between us. Just as I reached them they stopped, the tunnel had opened into a large, narrow, curved cavern, again lit, though barely, by hundreds of the little bulbs.

A river flowed past, as oily and torpid as the one in the forest. It gurgled out of a wall of rock flowed past us and joined a lake, presumably then leaving the cavern by some underwater hole. We stood at the rocky bottom of a steep-sided valley, all around us old, narrow metal ladders, fixed into the glistening, brown rock, led up to ledges, platforms, holes and tunnels. Water oozed, dripped and dribbled from every crack. Stalactites and mites flourished in one corner, big piles of loose rock hinted at mining activity in another. With judicious lighting and piped Cocteau Twins the place could have seemed delightfully magical and even without them I found myself, for the first time since the gate, perceptibly relaxing.

Then Mrs Turner screamed. It was not a scream of fear but one of triumph, it was blood-curdling, insane, violent and ugly. Several pieces of rock loosened themselves and skittered down as the echoes died. My feeling of panic returned but so did a new feeling, a sort of rage or hate, I was so deeply afraid that I wanted to smash someone, someone much weaker than myself, to crush something, to kick with all my force, to utterly destroy, in the most brutal way possible, a thing that could not fight back. I stared at the women who were embracing and dancing around. I clenched my teeth as tightly as possible, then I rushed over to a ladder and wrenched at it, wanting to pull it out of the rock and break it into pieces, to whirl it around my head and crash it into the unresisting rock. But it was quite well secured and I couldn't budge it.

After some valiant attempts I desisted. The women were looking at me blankly, I believe they were afraid. Mrs Turner asked me if I was feeling all right. I replied that I was fine but a little peckish. Without thinking I used the word peckish a little rudely, saying it as if it was quite vulgar, and Mrs Turner seemed perturbed and a little aroused by this. She smiled and explained to me, unnecessarily slowly I thought, that they would be a short while, that they were playing a practical joke on a friend and that shortly we would all leave and they would buy me lunch as a reward for my patience.

The sound of the word lunch cheered me no end but I affected to be grumpy, lay my handkerchief out on a rock and sat on it. The two women consulted a piece of paper, clambered up a ladder and disappeared. I waited. I hummed a little of Pergolesi's Stabat Mater. I threw some pebbles into the sullen lake. The splashes rumbled through the heavy air, springing off the rock, reverberating down the tunnels. I set up a target, retired to quite a distance and tried to knock it over. I sat again. I considered leaving but I couldn't remember which way we had come.

Then I heard some people approaching, male voices, gruff and unrefined. A feeling of dread engulfed me like a tidal wave, I nearly vomited with fear on the spot. Trapped like a rat under tons of sweating rubble. I scabbled blindly up a slimy, ladder, along a narrow ledge and scurried down a tunnel. I had gone a few feet when I froze in panic. What if this was the way they were coming! I listened but could hear nothing. I cursed myself for leaving the house without my gun.

Then I heard screaming, the sound of a struggle, Mrs Turner shrieking, a gunshot, male voices viciously hissing at her to shut up, the sounds of running and splashing, then silence. I listened so hard that I almost stopped breathing. When I remembered to breathe again the breaths come in tiny, rapid pants, like a rabbit caught by a dog. I fought to control myself, to calm down, but it was very hard. I wanted to run but I didn't know where to go. I started to sob and had to force myself to be quiet. Then the men started to mumble again. They sounded relaxed, they even muffled out some laughs. I inched forward to the mouth of the tunnel until I could see them. There were three of them, they were standing with their backs to me looking down at Mrs Turner. She was gagged and tied up and soaking wet and shaking with fear or cold, probably fear.

I couldn't help thinking that it served her right.

Her friend was nowhere to be seen. The men talked some more then one of them climbed a ladder, not mine thank goodness, and disappeared. Then I saw Mrs Turner's friend, half in the river, sprawled out and bloody, presumably dead. My stomach rumbled, I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I studied the men, mid forties, unhealthy, common, one balding, the other deeply hirsute, hair clearly sprouting from the neck of his tee shirt despite the distance I was observing from. Both men had Phantom of the Opera tee shirts on and I remember wondering if this was significant.

I watched and waited, unsuccessfully trying to force my fear-addled brain to form a coherent plan of attack. Then my stomach rumbled again and it was like a clarion call to action, the rage I had experienced before resurfaced and my fear transmogrified into loathing. The incalculable mass of rock all around me squeezed me out of my bolt hole like a jewel of pimple puss. These men were coarse, ugly commoners, I despised them and I wanted to be rid of them. Although it was contrary to my nature I stealthily crept towards them, full of this sudden, seething malevolence, focussed, directed and calmly intent on vicious attack.

They really didn't have a chance. Firstly, they thought they were alone - apart from the subdued and terrified Mrs Thompson and her late friend. Secondly, when they did notice me they saw a diminutive, unprepossessing and timid individual wending his way through the rocks towards them. Thirdly, they imagined I was about to throw themselves at their mercy because I was (involuntarily) sobbing and whimpering. So when I suddenly hurled a rock at point blank range into one of their faces, they were more astonished than distressed. Which gave me time to hop onto the other and pummel his nose as hard as I could with another rock. I won't go into graphic detail but I must admit I relished the bloody damage I was inflicting. My attack was overwhelmingly furious. I flew from one to the other, kicking, biting and twisting. The two of them soon became like flabby sacks of mince, splitting and oozing and completely unresisting. Whilst they were twitching and bleeding on the ground the third man returned. He was gingerly carrying a glowing, long-handled retort the size of a large domestic saucepan. He stopped in his tracks at the top of a ladder and, aghast, took in the mayhem.

He looked at me so I fell over (an inspired tactic although I later regretted the rips in my slacks) and started to groan. He was looking around for a place to put the retort, which was clearly full of molten metal, and turned his back. I shimmied up the ladder and, just as he put the crucible down, yanked him backwards and he spilled off the ledge with a stifled yell, head first onto his hairy friend.

I gingerly picked up the heavy retort and looked down on my enemies. The third man was getting to his feet and staggering over to the bottom of the ladder. He grasped the rungs and looked straight up at me. I threatened him with the molten metal. He looked at me stupidly, clearly dazed by his nasty fall. It's gold. he explained, as if the fact would make everything better, as if I would suddenly shake his hand and arm in arm we would waddle off to some cheap pub which would be shaking to the dreary throb of crass popular ditties and shimmering with the stink, the bellowing obscenities and the trilling inanities of his grotesque brothers and sisters.

Pulling an amusingly rueful face, I tipped a good portion of my saucepan fair and square on the thick head of this foolish man. He screamed as he sizzled and crumbled to the floor, the cavern shook with the noise, flakes of rock skittled off the walls, then chunks plummeted, splashing into the lake, smashing into pieces on the floor. Everything began to shake and rumble and I frantically tried to remember which tunnel led out into the open. Mrs T. was trying to attract my attention and I slid down the ladder and ran to her side. Which way out? I hissed as I wrenched off her gag. That one, that one. she yelled, jabbing with her head at a nice, solid-looking tunnel. Without another word I thrust my hands in her pockets, found her car keys and sprinted towards salvation. She (of course) screeched Untie me! followed by a string (or rather a rope!) of obscenities. At the tunnel entrance I indulged in a quick look back. She was comically hopping along through a storm of falling rock as if she was in some devilish sack race. I turned and sprinted down the tunnel, the sound of the devastation reverberating behind me, seemingly getting closer and closer no matter how fast I raced along. Then I saw the massive door up ahead and my heart sank.

How to get out without the code? Was I to die here after all my heroic efforts?

I reached the door and pushed to no avail. I turned and listened and heard a crashing and rumbling pouring up the tunnel towards me. I examined the door, my heart racing, and found a handle. I turned it. The door opened and I was out. I was safe. I stumbled into the forest and collapsed.

The cacophony came to a crescendo and then the grimy glade was filled with silence. A little dust drifted out of the doorway. It was dusk. I lay there exhausted. I wanted to fall asleep but I forced myself to get up and retrace my steps. Eventually I found Mrs T's vehicle, stretched out on the back seat and fell asleep.

I woke in a cloud of mosquitoes and covered in bites, it was Nine O Clock. I was starving. I started Mrs T's ridiculous car and, with some difficulty, lurched off down the track.

The funny thing was that when I got out to open the gate I still experienced the same fear of being stranded, even though there was nobody else in the car.

I parked in an unkempt cul-de-sac in the dreary outskirts of my town and methodically cleaned away all evidence of my presence.

I never heard anything more about the whole sorry episode. The only repercussions so far have been an unusually high dry cleaning bill, one ruined pair of suede shoes and the fact that Mrs T (who somehow extracted herself from the mine after all) snubbed me at Woolworths last week.