

Eat, Pray, and Maybe Die

Poison. If he was going to do it, poison might work best. Ethylene glycol was colorless, odorless, and slightly sweet to the taste. It would be fatal in under an hour and difficult to detect. A food chemist at GMO Food Company, Bob Crane daydreamed about the mechanisms to deliver the poison. A fancy cocktail. Perfect. But an autopsy could be risky.

His boss, Lois Cohen, had fired Bob's lover from her job in the lab where they both worked. "Doesn't fit our culture," Cohen had said. Crushed, Terri had left town---and Bob. He would never forgive Cohen for ruining his only chance at happiness.

Maybe Bob could use a gun to the head. Easy, quick, fatal. But then, he'd have to find an unregistered gun and learn to use it. And with all the technology available to crime scene detectives, he was sure they could trace a gun to him somehow.

Drowning? Car accident? He realized it was actually difficult to kill someone you hated and get away with it. He could go to her house and whack her in the head with a brick or heavy pan. Too messy. Too much evidence could be left behind.

Standing in his own kitchen, Bob waited for the "boss from hell." In a few minutes some of his friends from work would also arrive. He'd scheduled the brunch prior to Cohen's firing of Terri. Reluctantly, he had decided to keep the date---if for nothing else to try and stay on Cohen's good side himself.

Contentiously divorced, he was paying exorbitant child support payments for his daughter, Ava. Bob didn't begrudge the higher costs, but now his salary was stretched to the breaking point. He had been lonely for years, until he met Terri. Her memory hung on like a ghost.

He unscrewed a bottle of dried cilantro and sniffed. Not good enough, he decided. This meal must be special for his friends. Bob pulled out a bunch of cilantro from the refrigerator. It smelled grassy and sweet and left a spicy prickle in his nose.

Mexican food was everyone's favorite. Bob had chosen that for the main course: Bobby Flay's ranch-style eggs with chorizo and tomato-red chili sauce.

He set his bamboo cutting board on the counter and placed eight ounces of chorizo sausages on it. The recipe said to remove the skins, so Bob went to the drawer next to the sink. His fingers crawled over the handles of the Wusthof knives.

He cupped a sausage in his palm. It felt as soft as a baby's skin. He inserted the tip of the steel knife at the lower end of the meat and pricked the skin, sliding the blade underneath. What would it feel like to plunge the knife into living flesh? Bob worked upward along the length of the sausage. When he got to the top end, he used his fingers to spread the skin and unwrap it carefully from the meat inside. He smelled the spicy aroma with hints of hot, dry deserts far to the south of his home in Minneapolis.

Cohen had been his boss for three years---three years of hell. In her fifties, she had put on weight but still wore short skirts that were as tight as the skins he'd just stripped off the sausages. The arrogant, ignorant "drill sergeant" oversaw Bob's research lab.

With her as his boss, Bob's workload had doubled. That made her team meetings even more maddening. The Bitch scheduled them and everyone was expected to attend. Bob flashed back to the meeting last week. She had made her entrance 12 minutes late while seven people waited. As she sat down, her phone hummed the Neil Diamond song, "Cracklin' Rosie." It sounded like a social call. After 8 minutes of moronic chatter, she hung up and dismissed

everyone. Bob had lost over an hour from his pending projects, and he knew there would be hell to pay.

He searched through his wine and selected a Montepulciano for the chili sauce. Bob removed a sauce pan from the lower cupboard. He set it on the stove and added canola oil to heat up. He arranged the sausage into the pan. With a wooden spoon Bob crumbled the meat. It sizzled and released a pungent aroma of spices.

The doorbell rang. With long strides, Bob loped through the living room to the front door. He opened it to see Jo Ann, the chemist who worked in the lab next to his. She smiled, stood on her tip toes, and pecked him on the cheek. “Hey, it’s Emeril himself.” She laughed. “Naw, you’re too skinny.” Her hair smelled like herbal shampoo.

Bob hurried back to the kitchen, followed by Jo Ann. “Thanks for coming early. I could use some help.”

Jo Ann clinked a bottle of Jose Cuervo Blanco tequila onto the counter. Next to that she emptied a mesh bag of limes. They rolled around in crooked paths. “This okay for your margaritas?”

“Sure. I make ‘em from scratch.” Bob hovered over the spitting sauce pan. He used a slotted wooden spoon to lift out the golden brown meat and set the clumps onto some paper towels. “I’ll be sure to give Cohen a triple shot. That’ll finish her off.”

“You should substitute drain cleaner,” Jo Ann whispered.

“Too messy. I’d have to clean up.”

“Okay, I know I promised not to talk about her, but you know what she pulled yesterday?”

Bob snapped a can opener onto a can of Hunt's Whole Peeled Plum Tomatoes and twisted the handle as it crawled around the rim. "Nothing will surprise me."

"Okay, so she's always saying her nephew's got ADHD, right? Well, she ordered me to head-up a charitable drive for an ADHD counseling center. Not even remotely work related! Wasting company resources! Ask me, I think the kid needs to get out of her clutches."

"He's a charity that's always been close to your heart." Bob kidded Jo Ann.

"Shut-up. Okay, I know damn well once I've worked my ass off, Cohen will take the credit."

"She always does."

Jo Ann pounded her fist on the counter. "Take that, you freak!" she shouted. "Not that I'm defending her, but I'm impressed that she has taken such good care of her nephew. Too bad Cohen can't bring some of that charity into the office."

"Meanwhile, squeeze the limes for the margaritas. I'll prepare one for the 'She-wolf of the SS'." He emptied the tomatoes into a small bowl and poured almost all the oil out of the pan. Next, he rolled a Spanish yellow onion onto the cutting board. He selected the Chef's knife, twelve inches long and almost two inches deep.

Gripping it tightly, he cut down in the middle of the onion. The skin crackled, clear juice ran out, and the left side fell away. Bob blinked as the oils floated up into his eyes. Placing the tip of the knife on the board, he levered the blade up and down across the rings to chop them. He heard the crisp sound of the blade severing the pieces into square chunks. While his eyes stung, the sound of the knife chunked against the bamboo over and over.

Bob thought of Terri. It had been such a struggle for Bob to date again after the debilitating divorce, but Terri had coaxed him along. Bob's vacant and narrow life had

blossomed for the first time. Now without Terri, his future collapsed like a dead plant before winter.

“I got a better story,” Bob said to Jo Ann. “Last summer she got tickets for a Twin’s baseball game. Said it would be a ‘team building’ event. But there was no requirement to attend, so I spent the day with Ava. Did I get shit from her! Told me it would definitely affect my future with the company.” He poured tequila, lime juice, and triple sec into a steel shaker filled with ice. Bob shook it roughly and heard the ice clatter against the steel. He poured out two drinks into frosted glasses.

“That’s bullshit.” Jo Ann sipped her drink. “Oh, is this good.”

“Glad you like it. Cooking and entertaining are about the only things that give me pleasure anymore.”

Jo Ann’s face wrinkled. “I bet Cohen will be late, as usual, so she can make a grand entrance.”

“When she drives, the sun visor is always down so she can look in the mirror all the time.” Bob used the knife to scrape the chopped onions into the pan. “All she talks about are her problems. Her job, her weight, her heart problems. It’s only her malicious personality that keeps her going.”

Bob unwrapped five cloves of garlic. Using the flat side of the chef’s knife, he placed it on top of a clove and smacked the blade with his palm. Smashing a skull would feel good. Underneath, the garlic split open and the husk fell off, leaving the smashed cloves. In the pan with the onions, Bob watched the garlic turn walnut brown as it released a pungent odor.

He glanced at his watch that hung loose on his wrist. “Dammit! I forgot to fix a dessert.” He sighed. “I want this to be perfect so that you can’t even detect my presence in the preparation.”

Jo Ann said, “Don’t worry. You’ve got all this fruit for dessert. Who else is coming?” “Gary and Maureen.”

“Gary?” JoAnn’s eyes opened wide. She slammed the margarita glass on the counter. “Are you really being mean? Do you know what our *beloved leader* did to him?”

“No, what?” He turned down the heat on the pan. “She gave him a big research project. Told him he was completely in charge. Okay, she interfered every half hour for days until he finally snapped. I know this is a time when you guys are supposed to let your feminine side out, but for God’s sake, the guy actually cried.”

“That’s horrible.” On the cutting board, Bob lined up a bright red jalapeno pepper, an ancho chili, and a pasilla chili that was black and shriveled like a raisin on steroids. They looked harmless lying there. But the combined heat of these ingredients could be deadly hot. Bob stretched on a pair of latex gloves and used his paring knife to attack the jalapeno pepper first. Maybe he should add a Ghost chili to sear the lungs, throat, and tongue. Wouldn’t kill her, but would cause great pain. Bob smiled.

The sharp blade hesitated at the resistance of the outer skin. Bob sawed back and forth and burst through into the soft flesh underneath. The pungent smell irritated his nose. He chopped the pepper over and over. The recipe called for a coarse cut, but he got carried away and mutilated the pieces until they were scattered over the board in tiny bits.

The front door bell rang again.

Bob took a deep breath, stopped cutting, and went to open the door. Maureen reached up to give him a loose hug. Their faces didn't touch. "Sorry, I'm early," she said.

"No problem. JoAnn's here, and I'm making margaritas." Bob stepped aside as she walked toward the kitchen. Maureen opened her offering: two bags of tortillas. "I could only find flour, no corn. Sorry it's not more authentic."

Bob stripped off the gloves and waved his hand to indicate that was all right. "I still have to make the chili sauce." He pulled out another sauce pan and set it on the stove.

"Why are you being so nice to the Wicked Witch of the West?" Maureen asked him.

JoAnn said, "He's sucking-up for a promotion."

"Hope you have better luck than me. She told me that with my resume I wasn't promotable," Maureen said. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm out of the lab as soon as I can find anything else." She accepted a drink from Bob.

He nodded with understanding. "I'm really doing this for all of you. And considering how she dumped Terri, it doesn't hurt for me to stay on her good side."

Maureen shrugged. "I hope you're right."

Bob glanced away to avoid answering. Terri's ghost always hovered near Bob. "Hey, someone's at the door."

She left the kitchen and came back with Gary. He was short with red hair and a bushy beard. From a paper bag he lifted out a six-pack of *Corona* beer, slick with moisture. "Hey, man. Put these in the fridge." He high-fived Bob. "Dude, the only reasons I'm here is 'cause of you. I sure as hell wouldn't come for HER."

"We could write a new TV series called, 'Horrible Bosses.'" Jo Ann laughed.

From the top cupboard, Bob lowered a Cuisinart food processor onto the counter. He poured the plum tomatoes into the top of the processor, and watched as the red globs splashed over the gleaming blades at the bottom. Dump her in a cement mixer.

Bob added one cup of the wine into the pan with the onions and chorizo. As the mixture thickened, he scraped the coating off the bottom of the pan. He felt the glaze breaking up, and he increased the pressure. The glaze cracked and broke into jagged pieces that Bob smashed with the flat end of the wooden spoon.

Maureen stirred her margarita with a fingertip. The citrus smell wafted through the kitchen. “Uh, anyone know about the rumors of some more lay-offs?”

“Huh?” Bob felt a jolt shoot through his chest. The payments for his daughter were already bankrupting him. He couldn’t afford to lose his job.

Gary took a long drink of *Corona*. “Dude, haven’t you heard?”

“What?” Bob stopped working over the pan. He could tell by the tone of Gary’s voice that something was wrong.

Gary wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Dude, The Bitch is clearing-out the labs.”

“What’s that mean?” Bob felt his chest tighten.

“Just a rumor, but I know someone who knows the vice president.” Gary moved next to Bob and curved an arm over his shoulders. “All I know is, your lab’s in the line of fire. I hope you don’t get shot, Dude.”

“But---“The memory of Terri’s departure at Cohen’s hands settled on Bob. He struggled to catch his breath.

Jo Ann must have seen how devastated he was because she slid over to put her arm around his waist. “You could call-off the brunch. We’d understand.”

Bob mumbled, “No, no, that’s okay. You guys are here and everything’s almost ready.” He circled the kitchen for a few minutes. His head popped up. “I’ve got some time now to make some banana bread for dessert.”

He found the large mixing bowl and sloshed in all the ingredients. Dipping an electric mixer into the bowl, he beat the yolk of the eggs to splatter against the side. Increasing the speed of the mixer, he pummeled the ingredients. Shaking a handful of walnuts into the Cuisinart, he watched as the blades pulverized them. He ladled the contents into a baking pan and smacked the mixture with a spoon so hard it almost slopped over the sides as he shoved it into the oven. What about a tanning bed “accident?”

They all moved into the living room and kept drinking to get prepared for their nemesis.

An hour later, IT finally arrived. She paused at the door, waited until everyone had looked toward her, and walked in. Without looking at Bob, she shoved past him. From the center of the room, she announced, “I’m thirsty.” Her breath smelled stale.

Bob fought to control himself as he thought about how much he wanted to kill her right on the spot. About how he could use the frying pan to bash her head senseless and how the chorizo and oil would fly all over, mixed with blood and bits of her brain. He stopped and took a deep breath.

Alone in the kitchen, Bob mixed a special margarita for Cohen. After pouring it into a stemmed glass, he washed out the shaker thoroughly.

She grabbed it without thanks, and slurped the opaque lime liquid. She ordered a second one from Bob and they all waited, hungry, for almost an hour while she finished her drinks.

Then Bob cracked eggs into a frying pan, added the chorizo, salt and pepper, and turned the heat too high, almost burning the mixture. He set two eggs, crisp and brown around the edges, on top of a warm tortilla on each plate and Jo Ann served them.

“Put the tomato chili sauce on top,” Bob told them and turned to The Bitch. Staring at her, he said, “Hope it’s not too hot for you.” He didn’t smile.

She grunted. “I love it hot, but my cardiologist told me to watch it. Seems I’ve got some new issues.” She waited for anyone to console her. No one spoke.

During brunch, the conversation teetered from one topic to another, everyone careful not to mention work. For dessert, Bob returned from the kitchen with a brown loaf of banana bread. He set it directly in front of Cohen. “For you. A special recipe my grandma always made.”

“I don’t like dessert,” Cohen said. She pushed the bread away. When she saw his expression, she growled, “Oh, for God’s sake. You’re always begging for something. Okay.”

Holding a serrated bread knife to sever a slice off the loaf. Bob approached her from behind her neck. He glanced down and moved to the bread. He sawed off a slice and handed it to his boss.

She propped both elbows on the table and ate quickly. “It’s okay, Bobby.” Her breath wheezed, and she leaned forward to cough.

Bob watched her.

Cohen leaned back again, and Bob could see her throat working as if she couldn’t swallow. “Are you okay?” Bob asked.

“Don’t know.” Cohen panted and rocked back and forth. A red flush rose from her

chest to grab her neck. She stopped moving and sat straight up. She took a long drink of mineral water and said, “Better. Hope it’s not the old heart.” Cohen flashed a weak smile. No one said anything. “I think I’m okay.”

Bob stared at her.

In a few minutes, the flush spread across her face. She tilted to the side. “Dizzy---“

Maureen jumped up, and her chair clattered onto the floor behind her. “Shouldn’t we call 911? Someone?”

“Yeah,” Gary agreed.

Maureen ran around the end of the table to stand beside Cohen but didn’t touch her.

“My chest . . . can’t breathe . . .” her words slurred. “Aargh!” she screamed. Sweat spread across her face. It smelled metallic.

Maureen hopped from one foot to the other. “That does it. I’m calling.” She ran into the bedroom where she’d left her purse.

Bob remained on his side of the table. He watched as she fell off the chair and her body thudded onto the floor. Her legs quivered and her arms jerked to the sides. Then, she rolled over onto her back and stared with red, unconscious eyes toward the ceiling.

A half hour later, after the emergency medics had done all they could for her, they told the stunned group she was dead.

“Heart attack?” Gary asked.

The older man shrugged. “Can’t say. Could be.”

“Will they do an autopsy?” Gary said.

“Maybe,” the paramedic said. “Wait a minute. You say her name was Cohen? Was she Jewish?”

“She told us she had some heart issues,” Jo Ann interrupted.

The group looked up from the body on the floor to Bob. He picked up three plates and Cohen’s cocktail glass and washed them off thoroughly in the kitchen. When he returned, their eyes silently questioned him. He frowned and said, “Maybe it really was too hot.” Bob grinned, but when he saw the gray faces around him, he stopped. He finally answered the medic, “Yes, she was Jewish.”

“Okay.” The man grunted as he reached across his knee into the black mesh bag on the floor. He removed a printed brochure. “New law just passed in Minnesota. Gotta give this to the next of kin. Do you know who that would be?”

“I can give it to her nephew,” Jo Ann said. “Why?”

“See, most Muslims, Native Americans, and Jewish people object to any autopsy being done. So, this tells the family that they can object and we’ll respect their religious preferences.”

“Which means?” Bob leaned forward on one foot.

“The family probably won’t want an autopsy,” the older man said. He heaved himself up and wobbled on his front leg for an instant before he nodded to his assistant to bag the body.