

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF **KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL**

ANTHONY BOURDAIN

Medium

**A BLOODY VALENTINE
TO THE WORLD OF FOOD
AND THE PEOPLE
WHO COOK**

Raw



MEDIUM

RAW

**A Bloody Valentine to the World of
Food and the People Who Cook**

ANTHONY BOURDAIN

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ALSO BY ANTHONY BOURDAIN

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About the Publisher

Selling Out

I was so supremely naive about so many things when I wrote *Kitchen Confidential*—my hatred for all things Food Network being just one of them. From my vantage point in a busy working kitchen, when I'd see Emeril and Bobby on the tube, they looked like creatures from another planet—bizarrely, artificially cheerful creatures in a candycolored galaxy in no way resembling my own. They were as far from my experience or understanding as Barney the purple dinosaur—or the saxophone stylings of Kenny G. The fact that people—strangers—seemed to love them, Emeril's studio audience, for instance, clapping and hooting with every mention of gah-lic, only made me more hostile.

In my life, in my world, I took it as an article of faith that chefs were unlovable. That's why we were chefs. We were basically ... bad people—which is why we lived the way we did, this half-life of work followed by hanging out with others who lived the same life followed by whatever slivers of emulated normal life we had left to us. Nobody loved us. Not really. How could they, after all? As chefs, we were proudly dysfunctional. We were misfits. We knew we were misfits, we sensed the empty parts of our souls, the missing parts of our personalities, and this was what had brought us to our profession, had made us what we were.

I despised their very likability, as it was a denial of the quality I'd always seen as our best and most distinguishing: our otherness.

Rachael Ray, predictably, symbolized everything I thought wrong—which is to say, incomprehensible to me—about the Brave New World of celebrity chefs, as she wasn't even one of "us." Back then, hearing that title applied to just anyone in an apron was particularly angering. It burned. (Still does a little.)

What a pitiable fool I was.

But my low opinion of the Food Network actually went back a little further in time. Back to when they were a relatively tiny, sad-sack start-up with studios on the upper floors of a office building on Sixth Avenue, a viewership of about eight people, and the production values of late-night public-access porn. Before Emeril and Bobby and Mario helped build them into a powerhouse international brand. (In those days, such luminaries of the dining scene as Donna Hanover [then Giuliani] and Alan Richman, Bill Boggs and Nina Griscom, would sit around in tiny, office-size rooms, barely enough room for the cameras, showing pre-recorded promo reels—the type of crap they show on the hotel channel when you turn on the tube at the Sheraton.) You know the stuff: happy "customers" awkwardly chawing on surf and turf followed by "Chef Lou's signature cheesecake ... with a flavor that says 'Oooh la-la!'" After which, Alan or Donna or Nina or Bill would take a few desultory bites from a sample of same—which had been actually FedExed from whatever resort or far-flung dung hole they were promoting that week.

I was invited on to cook salmon. I was working at Sullivan's at the time, and flogging m

firstborn (and already abandoned by its publisher) book, a crime novel called *Bone in the Throat*. I arrived to find a large and utterly septic central kitchen/prep area, its sinks heaped with dirty pots and pans, refrigerators jammed with plastic-wrapped mystery packages that no one would ever open. Every surface was covered with neglected food from on-camera demonstrations from who knows how long ago, a panorama of graying, oxidizing, and actively decaying food beset with fruit flies. The “chef” in charge of this facility stood around with one finger jammed up his nose to the knuckle, seemingly oblivious to the carnage around him. Cast and crew from the various productions would wander in from time to time and actually pick at this once-edible landfill and eat from it. Once in the studio, cooking on camera was invariably over a single electric burner, which stank of the encrusted spills left by previous victims. For my salmon demonstration, I recall, I had to scrub and wash my own grill pan, after retrieving it from the bottom of a sink as multilayered as the ruins of ancient Troy.

This unimpressive first encounter in no way made me actively “hate” the Food Network. It would be more accurate to say I was dismissive. I didn’t take them seriously. How could one?

And, to be honest with myself, I never really “hated” Emeril, or Bobby, or even Rachael, as much as I found their shows ... ludicrous and somehow personally embarrassing.

My genuine contempt for FN came *later*—after *Kitchen Confidential*. After I was making a nice living making fun of Emeril and Bobby and Rachael. When I went to work for the bastards.

I was still cooking every day and night. The book was on the *New York Times* bestseller list, but a healthy distrust, a strong suspicion that I’d better keep my day job, was still very much the order of the day. This couldn’t last, I thought. It was surely a fluke. A flash in the pan. What possible appeal could my story—something I’d written with no larger audience than the New York-area line cooks, waiters, and bartenders in mind—have beyond the tristate area? And if twenty-eight years in the restaurant business had taught me anything at all, it was that if things look good today, they will most assuredly turn to shit tomorrow.

While I doubted the longevity of my time in the sun, I was aware that I was putting up some nice numbers for my publisher. I may have been a pessimist, but I was not an idiot. Seizing the moment while the iron is hot, as they say, I went in and pitched a second book and a decidedly fatter advance—quickly, before the bloom was off the rose and I faded inevitably back into insolvency and obscurity. I brashly suggested a book about me traveling all over the world, to all the cool places I’d ever dreamed of going, eating and drinking and getting into trouble. I would be willing to do this—and write about it, I suggested. If my publisher would pay for it.

Shockingly, they were willing to pay for it.

Shortly after that, two unimpressive-looking men walked into Les Halles and asked me if I’d be interested in making television. They had *Kitchen Confidential* in mind, no doubt, the property I had already sold off to Hollywood (to end up as a *very* short-lived sitcom). Undaunted by this news, they expressed interest when I told them I’d be unlikely to find time in any case—as I was about to embark on a year-long bounce around the world to fulfill my childhood fantasies of the exotic East and elsewhere.

I have to tell you that even at this early point, still wearing my kitchen whites, I was already dubious of anyone who claimed to be offering a TV deal. I had very quickly learned that when TV or movie people tell you “we’re all big fans over here” or “we’re very excited about this project,” it usually means nothing more than that they’re planning on paying for lunch. I was even more skeptical when they mentioned Food Network as a prime candidate for acquiring the project. This notion alone suggested these two goofs had no idea what they were talking about and no juice with anybody. I’d been savagely trashing the Food Network principal earners for some time—it was already shtick, part of a stand-up bit that would live on long after I stopped performing it. The fact that these two would even suggest Food Network hinted at problems far beyond the usual lack of imagination. The word “delusional” came to mind.

When, a week later, they called to tell me they’d set up a meeting, I was annoyed. Active and pissed off. No good would come of this. This, I was certain, was a waste of fucking time. I was bothered to neither shave nor shower for the meeting.

I ended up with a show titled, like the book, *A Cook’s Tour*. Something that necessarily and despite our best efforts quickly evolved into a sort of gonzo-travelogue of vérité footage and thrown together voice-overs. I had assumed my involvement with television would last no longer than the time it took me to write the book. And yet, amazingly enough, the show was picked up for a second season. Even more incredibly, the network, from the beginning, let me do pretty much whatever the fuck I wanted—allowing me to take the show anywhere I pleased, smoke on camera, curse as I needed—and, even more remarkably, along with the camera people/field producers, whom I became increasingly close to over many miles and many months of traveling together—tell stories any way I cared to, making, as it turned out, pretty good television.

I have to admit, I grew to like this life—roaming the globe in search of nothing more than food and kicks. I also came to enjoy the new-to-me process of telling stories with the help of an all-new chest of toys: cameras, editing boards, sound editing—and really creative professionals who knew how to use them. I like making things. And I like telling stories. I like going to Asia. And this TV gig allowed me to do all of those things

I got sucked in—not by fame or money (of which there was precious little). I’d long ago had all the cocaine I’d ever wanted. No sports car was ever going to cure my ills. I became seduced by the world—and the freedom that television had given me—to travel it as I wished. I was also drunk on a new and exciting power to manipulate images and sound in order to tell stories, to make audiences feel about places I’d been the way I wanted them to feel. I was increasingly proud of some of the episodes I and my partners, camera people/producers Chris Collins and Lydia Tenaglia, were making—and how we were making them. I began to appreciate what editors and sound mixers and postproduction people can do. Making TV was becoming ... *fun*, and, in more than a few cases, actually creatively satisfying.

I wrote the book and yet continued filming. The tail now wagged the dog. I was hooked on travel, on seeing the world, and on the terms I was seeing it. Simply put? I didn’t want to share. The world had become, on the one hand, a much bigger place, but, on the other hand, it contracted. Like a lot of travelers, I started to turn inward from the view out the window and started to see what was going on out there through an ever-narrowing lens. When I’d set out

I'd see a sunset or a temple and want, instinctively, to turn to my right or to my left and say to somebody, anybody, "Isn't that a magnificent sunset?"

That impulse quickly faded. I felt proprietary about the world. I became selfish. The sunset was mine.

I was on the road for the better part of two years, during which time everything in my life changed. I stopped working as a chef—a job whose daily routines had always been the one thing that stood between me and chaos. My first marriage began to fall apart.

Sitting down in the Food Network's corporate offices back in New York, I was a guy with very different priorities than the ones I'd left my kitchen with. For better or worse, I no longer had the ludicrous notion that this television thing could be "good" and even, occasionally, "important."

On a recent book tour in Spain, I'd been introduced to Ferran Adrià—and, amazingly, he'd agreed to allow us to shoot him in his workshop *taller* and in his nearly-impossible-to-reserve restaurant, El Bulli. Adrià was already the most important and controversial chef on the planet—and his restaurant the most sought-after reservation. More significantly, no one to date had ever filmed what he had agreed to show me and my crew: full access to his creative process, to him, his chefs, his favorite restaurants, his inspirations—and, finally, to eat and film the entire El Bulli tasting menu in the kitchen with Adrià himself at the table, explaining things course by course. It had never been done—nor has it since, as far as I know.

But while I was away, something had happened.

Suddenly they weren't so interested in "foreign"-based shows anymore at Food Network. The executives who'd enthusiastically taken us on and supported our more self-indulgent and racy endeavors didn't seem to have the pull they'd once had. Or the interest. When we told them about what Adrià had agreed to do, they were indifferent. "Does he talk English?" and "It's too smart for us" were both mentioned as factors in their eventual refusal to pony up for such an episode—or any episodes outside the United States, it now seemed.

A sour-faced network lawyer became a regular participant at "creative" meetings—subtly setting the agenda and guiding their direction. As warning signs go, this should have been a red alert. The biggest show on the network at that time, it was explained, was something called *Unwrapped*, involving stock footage of cotton candy and Mars Bars being made. Episodes cost about a tenth of what it cost to make our show—and rated, of course, much much higher. On those few occasions when we'd filmed *A Cook's Tour* in America, it was pointed out, particularly when I was seen to put anything barbecued in my mouth, ratings skyrocketed. Why couldn't I confine my wanderings to my own country—to parking-lot tailgate parties and chili cook-offs? All this foreign stuff, what with people talkin' funny and eatin' strange food ... didn't, it was explained in perfect lawyerese, fit their "current business model."

I knew there was no light at the end of the tunnel the day we were joined by a new hire—the lawyer and the (it would soon be revealed) outgoing execs stood up and said, "Say hello to Brooke Johnson ... who we're all *delighted* to have join us from ... [some other network]."

Ms. Johnson was clearly not delighted to meet me or my partners. You could feel the air go out of the room the moment she entered. It became instantly a place without hope or humor.

There was a limp handshake as cabin pressure changed, a black hole of fun—all light, a possibility of joy was sucked into the vortex of this hunched and scowling apparition. The indifference bordering on naked hostility was palpable.

My partners and I left knowing that it was the end of us at Food Network.

Of course, the FN “business model,” for which Ms. Johnson was apparently the vanguard, turned out to be a spectacularly successful one. With each incremental dumbing down of the programming, ratings climbed proportionately. A purge of the chefs who’d built the network followed. Mario and Emeril and nearly anybody else who’d committed the sin of professionalism were either banished or exiled, like Old Bolsheviks—seen as entirely unnecessary to the real business of “Food”—which was, they now recognized, actually about likable personalities, nonthreatening images, and making people feel better about themselves.

With every critical outrage—the humiliating, painful-to-watch Food Network Awards, the clumsily rigged-looking *Next Food Network Star*, the cheesily cheap-jack production values of *Next Iron Chef America*—every obvious, half-assed knock-off they slapped on the air would go on to ring up sky-high ratings and an ever-larger audience of cherished males twenty-two to thirty-six (or whatever that prime carbuying demographic is). In service to this new, growth-level dynamic, even poor, loyal Bobby Flay was banished from cooking anywhere near as well as he actually could—to face off with web-fingered yokels in head-to-head crab-cake contests—to almost inevitably (and dubiously) lose.

If any further evidence is needed of the inevitability, the supremacy of the Food Network Model—the runaway locomotive of its success, the brutal genius of the Brooke Johnson Five Year Plan—well, look at the landscape now: *Gourmet* magazine folded, and while the glossymagazine industry is in dire straits everywhere and distinguished, 180-year-old newspapers are closing down across the country, *Food Network* magazine, *Everyday with Rachael Ray*, and Paula Deen’s branded magazines are booming, the Empire of Mediocrity successfully spreading its tentacles everywhere.

This, I have come to understand, is the way of the world. To resist is to stand against the hurricane. Bend (preferably at the hip, asscheeks proffered). Or break.

But perhaps you need more visceral evidence of the Apocalypse:

Rachael Ray sent me a fruit basket. So I stopped saying mean things about her. It’s the easy with me now. Really. An unsolicited gesture of kindness and I have a very hard time being mean. It would seem ... ungrateful. Churlish. To be nasty to someone after they send you a gift of fruit doesn’t fit my somewhat distorted view of myself as secretly a gentleman. Rachael was shrewd about that.

Others have taken a more ... confrontational approach.

So, it’s the party following the *Julie & Julia* premiere, and I’m standing there by the end of the buffet, sipping a martini with Ottavia, the woman I’d married in 2007, and two friends when I feel somebody touching me. There’s a hand under my jacket and running up my back and I instantly assume this must be somebody I know really well to touch me in this way—particularly in front of my wife. Ottavia has had a couple of years of mixed martial arts training by now, and the last time a female fan was demonstrative in this way, she leaned over, grabbed her wrist, and said something along the lines of “If you don’t take your hands

off my husband, I'm going to smash your fucking face in." (In fact, I remember that those were her words exactly. Also, that this was not an idle threat.)

In that peculiar slow motion one experiences in car wrecks, in the brief second or so it took for me to turn, I recall that particularly frightening detail: my wife's expression, significant in that it was frozen into a rictus of a grin, paralyzed with a look I'd never seen before. What could be standing behind me that would put this unusual expression on my wife's face—make her freeze like that—a deer in the headlights?

I turned to find myself staring into the face of Sandra Lee.

Ordinarily by now, a woman's hand up my back, Ottavia would have been across the table with a flying tomahawk chop to the top of the skull—or a vicious elbow to the thorax—followed immediately by a left-right combination and a side kick to the jaw as her victim went on the way to the floor. But no. Such are the strange and terrible powers of television's Queen of Semi-Homemade that we, both of us, stood there like hypnotized chickens. The fact that Sandra was standing next to New York's attorney general—and likely next governor—Andrew Cuomo (her boyfriend), added, I thought, an implied menace.

"You've been a bad boy," Sandra was saying, perhaps referring to casual comments I made or may not have made, in which I may have suggested she was the "hellspawn of Betty Crocker and Charles Manson." The words "pure evil" might have come up as well. It was alleged that the words "war crimes" might also have been used by me—in reference to some of Sandra's more notorious offerings, like her "Kwanzaa Cake." Right now, I have no contemporaneous recollection of those comments.

Nor do I have any recollection of how I responded to the feel of Sandra's icy, predator claws working their way up my spine and around my hips—like some terrifying alien mandibles, probing for a soft spot before plunging deep into the soft goo of my kidneys or liver. Looking back, I imagine myself doing that Ralph Kramden thing: "Homina homina ... homina ..."

Actually ... no. It was closer to *Cape Fear*. Gregory Peck and family mesmerized by the evil Robert Mitchum—standing there in the doorway—a barely veiled menace just skirting the boundaries of acceptable behavior; with every ticking second, you're thinking, "Can I call the police ... now? ... How about ... now?" The menacing would-be intruder not yet crossing the line but letting you know, "I can come in any time I want."

She was probing below my kidney area now, looking my wife directly in the eyes while doing it, too, and saying, "No love handles"—not exactly true, but I don't think accurate measurement grading was the point of the exercise. She was letting my wife—and, by extension, me—know that like Mitchum in *Cape Fear*, she could walk right into our living room at any time and do to us whatever unholy and awful things she wished, and there was nothing we could do about it.

"Are your ears red yet?" were her final words as she gave one of my lobes a tug. The moment having had her way with me, she moved on. She'd made her point.

It's Sandra Lee's world. It's Rachael's world. Me? You? We're just living in it.

If this wasn't clear to me then, after Aunt Sandy had turned me inside out, left me shaken and husked, a shell of a man, like the remains of a lobster dinner, it became absolutely clear.

just last week, when Scripps Howard, the parent company of Food Network, outbidding Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp, bought *my* network, the Travel Channel—for nearly a billion dollars, putting me right back on Maggie's farm again, so to speak.

I remember now, from a distance, my earlier, dumber self, watching Emeril hawk his toothpaste (and, later, Rachael endorsing Dunkin' Donuts and Ritz Crackers) and gaping uncomprehending, at the screen, wondering, "Why would anybody making the millions and millions of bucks these guys are making endorse some crap for a few million more? I mean ... surely there's some embarrassment to putting your face next to Dunkin' Donuts—what with so many kids watching your shows—and Type 2 diabetes exploding like it is ... Surely there's a line not to be crossed at any price for these people, right?"

Later, I asked exactly that question of my fellow chefs—backstage at *Top Chef* one evening while waiting for the camera crew to set up for the next shot. I was talking with two chefs far more talented, far more creative—and more accomplished than I had ever been—guys with (unlike me) actual reputations to lose. Where does one draw the line, I asked of them? They mean ... there they were, avidly comparing notes on which airlines gave you more free miles in return for "menu consultation," which products were offering what moneys—and at one point was either of them saying about any particular product: "Burger King ... not ever ... no WAY!" or, after considering the question for a moment, "Okay. Mmmm. Lemme think. Astror Glide? No. I don't care how much money they're offering. I ain't endorsing that!" Like I said, I asked, "Where. Exactly. Is the line for you guys?"

The two of them looked at me like I had a vestigial twin hanging from my neck. Pityingly. They actually mocked me.

"Are you asking, 'How much would I have to pay you to taste a booger?'" said one, as if talking to a child. The two of them resumed their conversation, comparing soft-drink moneys to frozen pasta dinners, as if I were no longer there. This, clearly, was a conversation for grown-ups, and they considered me too clueless, too dumb, too unsophisticated about the world to be included in the discussion.

They were right. What was I talking about anyway?

The notion of "selling out" is such a quaint one, after all. At what point exactly does one really sell out? To the would-be anarchist—invariably a white guy in dreadlocks, talking about forming a band and "keepin' it real" while waiting for Mom and Dad to send a check—selling out is getting a job.

Certainly, anytime anyone gets up in the morning earlier than one would like, dragging oneself across town to do things one wouldn't ordinarily do in one's leisure time for people one doesn't particularly like—that would be selling out, whether that activity involves working in a coal mine, heating up macaroni and cheese at Popeye's, or giving tug jobs to strangers in the back of a strip club. To my mind, they are all morally equivalent. (You choose what you've got to do to get by.) While there is a certain stigma attached to sucking the cocks of strangers—because, perhaps, of particularly Western concepts of intimacy and religion—how different, how much worse, or more "wrong," is it than plunging toilets, hosing down a slaughterhouse floor, burning off polyps, or endorsing Diet Coke? Who—given more options and better choices—would do any of those things?

Who in this world gets to do only what they want—and what they feel consistent with their principles—and get paid for it?

Well ... I guess, *me*—until recently.

But wait. The second I sat down for an interview, or went out on the book tour to promote *Kitchen Confidential* ... surely that was kind of selling out, right? I didn't know Matt Lauer or Bryant Gumbel or any of these people. Why was I suddenly being nice to them? In what way was I different than a common whore, spending minutes, hours, eventually weeks of my rapidly waning life making nice to people I didn't even know? You fuck somebody for money, it's cash on the barrel. You pick up the money, you go home, you take a shower, and it's gone—presumably having used as much emotional investment as a morning dump. But what about week after week of smiling, nodding your head, pretending to laugh, telling the same stories, giving the same answers as if they'd just—only now—occurred to you for the first time?

Who's the ho now? Me. That's who.

Jesus—I would have given Oprah a back rub and a bikini wax, had she asked me when her people called. Fifty-five thousand copies a minute—every minute Oprah's talking about your book (according to industry legend)? I know few authors who wouldn't. So I guess I knew—even back then—what my price was.

There's that old joke, I've referred to it before, where the guy at the bar asks the girl she'd fuck him for a million dollars—and she thinks about it and finally replies, “Well, I guess for a million dollars, yeah ...” At which point he quickly offers her a dollar for the same service. “Fuck you!” she says, declining angrily. “You think I'd fuck you for a *dollar*? What do you think I am?” To which the guy says, “Well ... we've already established you're a whore. Now we're just haggling over the price.”

It's a crude, hateful, sexist wheezer of a joke—but it's as applicable to men as to women. To chefs as to any other craftsmen, artists, or laborers.

What was my problem with my peers—no, my *bettors*—grabbing the endorsement dollars left and right: the branded pots and pans, kitchen utensils, ghostwritten cookbooks, commercials for boil-in-a-bag dinners, toaster ovens, California raisins? I'd turned them all down.

I'd deluded myself for the longest time that there was ... “integrity” involved ... or something like that. But as soon as I became a daddy, I knew better.

I'd just been haggling over the price.

There'd never been any question of integrity—or ethics—or anything like that ... For fuck's sake, I'd stolen money from old ladies, sold my possessions on a blanket on the street for crack, hustled bad coke and bad pills, and done far worse in my life.

I started asking people about this. I needed guidance from people who'd been navigating these murky waters for years.

Among the more illuminating and poignant explanations, one came from—of all people—Emeril. We were guest hosts/roasters at a charity roast of a mutual friend, Mario Batali. In a quiet moment between dick jokes, we talked, as we sometimes do, me asking with genuine

curiosity why he continued to do it. He was, at the time, being treated very shabbily by the Food Network—I could see that he'd been hurt by it—and I asked him why he gave a fuck. “You’ve got a large, well-respected restaurant empire ... the cookbooks ... the cookware line”—which is actually pretty high-quality stuff—“presumably you’ve got plenty of love. Why go on? Why even care about television anymore—that silly show, the hooting audience of no-necked strangers? If I was you,” I went on, “it would take people two weeks to reach me on the phone ... I’d be so far off the fucking grid, you’d never see me in shoes again ... I live in a sarong somewhere where nobody would ever find me—all this? It would be a distant memory.”

He didn’t elaborate. He smiled tolerantly, then began listing the number of children, ex-wives, employees (in the hundreds) working for Emeril Inc., establishing for me in quick, broad—and slightly sad—strokes the sheer size of the Beast that had to be fed every day in order for him to be Responsible Emeril—and do right by all the people who’d helped him along the way and who now relied on him, in one form or another, for their living. His success had become an organic, ever-expanding thing, growing naturally larger, as it had to, for to shrink—or even stay the same—would be to die.

Mario has twelve restaurants and counting, watch and clog endorsements, the cookware, the books, the bobblehead doll, NASCAR affiliation, and God knows what else—nothing even seems to be enough for the man. Above and beyond the fact that he raises millions of dollars for various charities—including his own—he’s clearly not in it for the money. Always expanding, always starting new partnerships, trying new concepts. In Mario’s case, I think it’s about ego—and the fact that he’s got a restless mind. It’s not, and never was, enough—even interesting—to Batali to make money. If that had been the case, he’d have never opened Babbo (or Casa Mono, or Del Posto, or Otto, or Esca); he’d have opened his version of Mario’s Old Spaghetti Factories, coast to coast—and been swimming in a sea of cash by now. No.

Mario, I know for a fact, likes to swing by each of his New York restaurants at the end of the night and take a look at the receipts. He’s excited by the details. He gets off on successfully filling a restaurant that everyone said was doomed, of bringing the food cost below 20 percent. He likes to do the difficult thing, the dangerous thing—like take a gamble that what America needs and wants right now is ravioli filled with calf brains, or pizza topped with pork fat. For Mario, I’m quite certain, to be ten times richer—twenty times—and NOT take crazy-ass chances on restaurant concepts that no one ever expressed a desire for would mean to expire from boredom.

All Mario enterprises are coproductions. Every restaurant begins with an alliance, a moment of truth, where Don Mario evaluates the creativity and character of another person, looks into their heart, and makes a very important decision. In this way, the success or failure of whatever venture he’s embarked on is already determined long before he opens the door. So it’s never just business. It’s always, always, personal.

Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud—both with successful, revered, and respected mother-ship restaurants, have talked at various times about the necessity of holding on to talented people; the need to grow with the talents, experience, and ambitions of loyal chefs de cuisine, sous-chefs, and other longtime employees who want and deserve to move up or to have

“their own thing.” It becomes a simple matter of expand—or lose them.

To some extent, I suspect, what is often the French Michelin star model might be at work here as well: the three-star chef’s mother ship simply doesn’t and can’t ever make as much money as his more casual bistros or brasseries. (Those end up, in very real ways, subsidizing the more luxurious original—or, at the very least, offering a comfortable cushion should costs at the higher-end place rise or revenues decline. You can’t start laying off cooks at a three-star every time you have a bad week.)

Gordon Ramsay is maybe the most classic example of the force that keeps well-known chefs constantly, even manically, expanding. In Ramsay’s case, multiple television shows on both sides of the Atlantic coincide with a huge worldwide expansion of hotel-based restaurants. He already has the most successful cooking-competition show on TV with *Hell in the Kitchen*. He is a millionaire many, many times over, and yet he keeps expanding—to his eventual peril (the twelve restaurants he opened in the last few years have yet to turn a profit). No matter what your opinion of Ramsay’s food, or his awful but wildly popular home show, or his much better *Kitchen Nightmares* on the BBC, there is no denying that he is workaholic. There don’t seem to be enough hours in the day to contain his various endeavors and enterprises, and yet he goes on.

In Gordon’s case, one need only look at his childhood—as described in his autobiography. He grew up poor, constantly on the move, with an untrustworthy and unreliable dreamer of a father. No sooner had his family settled than they would have to move again—often one step ahead of the debt collectors. You *know* What Makes Gordon Run.

Very likely, an impulse similar to that of his onetime mentor and sometimes nemesis Marco Pierre White. Whatever riches they may have acquired or may yet acquire, there is and always will be the lingering and deeply felt suspicion that come tomorrow, it will all be gone. No amount is enough or will ever be enough, because deep in the bone they know that the bastards could come knocking at any minute and take it all away.

David Chang, whose crazy-ass pony ride to the top of the heap has just begun, feels, I suspect, all of the above motivations: a deadly combination of too few seats at his high-end standard-bearer restaurant, an ever-increasing number of talented loyalists, and a feeling that he’ll never be truly good enough at anything.

And then, of course, there’s the example of the iconic French Michelin-starred chef, one of the most celebrated and well represented (by sheer number of restaurants) in the world, who, in my presence, said simply:

“Enough bullshit. It’s time to make money.”

It was vanity that had kept me from being the Imodium guy. Not integrity. I wasn’t “keeping it real” declining their offers—and similar ones. I was just too narcissistic and loved myself a little too much to be able to handle waking up in the morning, looking in the bathroom mirror—and seeing the guy from TV who complains about freckling the bowl with loose diarrhea (until Imodium came along to save the day!). I didn’t take the cookware good ‘cause I didn’t want to find myself in an airport someday, approached by a disgruntled customer of whatever crap central warehouse actually produces that stuff, complaining about my substandard saucepot scorching his paella. I’m the kind of guy who doesn’t like to be

called on bullshit—unless knowingly bullshitting.

So I didn't take the forty grand a month they offered me to slap my name on a South Beach restaurant, 'cause I figured—even if I *don't* have to actually do anything for the money other than show up once in a while—there's that exposure. I could be on the other side of the world—but if the bartender at this joint, run by strangers, serves one underage girl, or a customer gets slipped a roofie, or one aggressive rat pops its head up out of the toilet one night and grabs a chunk of somebody's nut-sack, it's gonna be "OUTRAGE AT BOURDAIN RESTAURANT" in the tabloids. And that would conflict with my image of myself as somehow above that kind of thing.

But when my daughter came along and I continued to say "no," I knew I wasn't saving my cherry for principle. I'd just been waiting to lose it to the right guy.

The Happy Ending

I was born at New York Presbyterian Hospital in New York City in 1956, but I grew up in the leafy green bedroom community of Leonia, New Jersey.

I did not want for love or attention. My parents loved me. Neither of them drank to excess. Nobody beat me. God was never mentioned—so I was annoyed by neither religion nor church nor any notions of sin or damnation. Mine was a house filled with books and music—and frequently, films. Early in my childhood, my father worked days at Willoughby's camera store in Manhattan—and on weekends would come home with a rented 16-millimeter projector and classic movies. Later, when he became an executive at Columbia Records, I got free records for most of my adolescence. When I was twelve, he'd take me to the Fillmore East to see the Mothers of Invention or Ten Years After or whoever I was listening to that year.

Summers meant barbeques and Wiffle ball games in the backyard. In school, I was not bullied any more than the next kid—and maybe even a little less. I got the bike I wanted for Christmas. My counselor at camp did not molest me.

I was miserable. And angry.

I bridled bitterly at the smothering chokehold of love and normalcy in my house—compared to the freedom enjoyed by my less-welllooked-after friends. I envied them the dysfunctional and usually empty houses, their near-total lack of supervision. The weird, slightly scary, but enticing stashes of exotica we'd find in their parents' secret places: blurry black-and-white stag films, bags of weed, pills ... bottles of booze that nobody would notice when missing or slowly drained. My friends' parents always had other, more important things on their minds, leaving their kids to run wild—free to stay out late, to sleep over when and where they saw fit, to smoke weed in their rooms without fear of being noticed.

I was pissed about this. How come *I* couldn't have that? As I saw it, my parents were the only thing standing between me and a life spent taking full advantage of the times.

Much later, standing in some particularly bullshit kitchen, more of a saloon than anything resembling a real restaurant, I wasn't the sort of person to look back in puzzlement and regret, wondering where I might have gone wrong. I never blamed bad choices—like the heroin, for instance—or bad companions for my less than stellar career trajectory. I don't and never did refer to my addiction as my "disease." I'd *wanted* to become a junkie, after all, since I was twelve years old. Call it a character flaw—of which drugs were simply a manifestation, a petulant "fuck you" to my bourgeois parents, who'd committed the unpardonable sin of loving me.

At any given moment, when I'm honest with myself, I can look back and say that, on balance, I'd probably make exactly the same moves all over again. I *know* what brought me to those crummy kitchens, the reeking steam tables, the uncleaned deli-slicer, yet another

brunch shift—I did.

Life, even in the bad old days, had been perfectly fair to me. I knew this.

Even when it was McAssCrack's Bar and Grill I was working at, I knew I was pretty lucky. Lucky to be alive, given the precarious business of scoring dope every day in the '80s New York City. Lucky to be in reasonably good health, given what was happening around me—and all the people who came up with me who weren't around anymore. There was even love in my life through it all, however improbable—a criminal partnership of long standing.

As much as I hated standing there in the bad times, pre-poaching eggs for service, letting them slip off the spoon into a bus tub of ice water, I couldn't blame anybody. Like I said, I made my choices. One after the other.

Then again, I could blame my dad, I guess. For all the joy he brought me when he came home with the *Sgt. Pepper* album. Or *Disraeli Gears*. An argument could be made, I guess, that this kind of exposure at an early age could lead one to an appetite for distraction—if not destruction. And maybe nine years old was a little young to see *Dr. Strangelove*—to find out that the world was surely going to end in a nuclear apocalypse (and soon). And that it would be funny when it happened. Perhaps this contributed to the nihilistic worldview I'd adopted later as a world-weary eleven-year-old.

If they ever find me with a crawl space full of dead hookers, I'll be sure to point the finger at Dad—and Stanley Kubrick.

But if we're playing the blame game? Top of the list for "it's all your fault—you made me do this way!" goes to two children's classic films: *The Red Balloon* and *Old Yeller*.

What exactly was the message of *The Red Balloon* anyway? Every time our teachers didn't show up, they'd haul out the projector and show us this supposedly heartwarming and inspiring story of a little French boy and his enchanted balloon friend.

But wait a minute. The poor kid is impoverished and clearly unloved. He wears the same clothes every day. Immediately on finding his balloon, he's ostracized by society, banned from public transportation, chastised at school, even ejected from church. His parents are either dead or have abandoned him—as the hideous crone who cruelly throws his balloon out the window at first encounter is clearly too old to be his mom. The boy's schoolmates are a feral, opportunistic bunch who instinctively seek to destroy what they don't understand and can't possess. In fact, nearly every other child in the film is depicted as part of an unthinking mob, fighting viciously among themselves even as they pursue the boy and his balloon through the streets, like a pack of wolves. The boy runs away, is assaulted, separated from his only friend—then reunites with it only to watch it die slowly before his eyes.

The happy ending? Balloons from all over Paris converge. The boy gathers them together and is lifted aloft. He drifts away, dangerously suspended over the city. The end.

Where's the kid going? To an unspecified "better" place—for sure. Or to a fatal drop where the balloons empty of their helium (as we've seen them do just previously).

The message?

Life is cruel, lonely, and filled with pain and random acts of violence. Everybody hates you and seeks to destroy you. Better to opt out altogether, to leap—literally—into the void.

escape by any means necessary. However uncertain or suicidal the way out.

Nice, huh? May as well have put a crack pipe in my hand right then. Why wait? Maybe *that* was why I never worked at the French Laundry.

Then there's *Old Yeller*. Even worse. A more cynical and unconscionably bleak message one could hardly imagine.

The story of a boy and his dog. A *Disney* story of a boy and his dog—which, as all children accumulated experience teaches them, means that *no matter what kind of peril the heroes go through, things will always turn out okay in the end*. This, by the time we sat down in the darkened theater, excited, sticky with Twizzlers, we had come to accept as an article of faith. A contract between kids everywhere, our parents, and the fine people at Walt Disney Studios. This was as powerful a bond as we knew, an assurance that held an otherwise uncertain universe together. Sure, Khrushchev was maybe going to drop the Big One on us, but goddammit, that dog was gonna make it out okay!

So, when Old Yeller gets sick with this rabies thing, little Tony is, naturally, not concerned. Pinocchio, after all, got out of that whale situation no problem. Sure, things looked bad for him, too, for a while, but he figured it out in the end. Bumpy ride with Bambi, what with Mom dying, but that ended okay. Like Mom and Dad never forgetting to pick you up from school, the Happy Ending was a dead cert.

It will be okay. It will turn out fine.

No one will hurt a fucking dog.

That's what I'm saying to myself, sitting there between Mom and Dad, staring up at the screen, breath held, waiting for the miracle.

Then they go and blow Old Yeller's fucking brains out.

I sit there stunned. "What do you *mean* there's no cure for rabies? I don't give a *fuck* the hadda put Yeller 'out of his misery'! What about *my* misery, cocksucker! They were supposed to fix things! He was supposed to get *better!!* Don't talk to me about *reality!* I don't care if it's a magical fucking rainbow shining out of a fairy princess's ass makes him better. He was supposed to get *better!!!*"

From that moment on, I looked at my parents and the whole world with suspicion. What else were they lying about?

Life was clearly a cruel joke. A place with no guarantees, built on a foundation of false assumptions if not outright untruths. You think everything's going okay ...

Then they shoot your fucking dog.

So, maybe *that's* why until I got my first dishwashing job, I had no respect for myself and no respect for anybody else.

I should probably sue.

The Rich Eat Differently Than You and Me

I was holed up in the Caribbean about midway through a really bad time. My first marriage had just ended and I was, to say the least, at loose ends.

By “loose ends” I mean aimless and regularly suicidal. I mean that my daily routine began with me waking up around ten, smoking a joint, and going to the beach—where I’d drink myself stupid on beer, smoke a few more joints, and pass out until mid-afternoon. This to be followed by an early-evening rise, another joint, and then off to the bars, followed by the brothels. By then, usually very late at night, I’d invariably find myself staggeringly drunk—the kind of drunk where you’ve got to put a hand over one eye to see straight. On the way back from one whorehouse or another, I’d stop at the shawarma truck on the Dutch side of the island, and, as best I could, shove a meat-filled pita into my face, sauce squirting onto my shirtfront. Then, standing there in the dark parking lot, surrounded by a corona of spilled sauce, shredded lettuce, and lamb fragments, I’d fire up another joint before sliding behind the wheel of my rented 4x4, yank the top down, then peel out onto the road with a squeal of tires.

To put it plainly, I was driving drunk. Every night. There is no need to lecture me. To tell me what might have happened. That wasting my own stupid life is one thing—but that I could easily have crushed how many innocents under my wheels during that time? I know. Looking back, I break into an immediate cold sweat just thinking about it. Like a lot of things in my life, there’s no making it prettier just ‘cause time’s passed. It happened. It was bad. There it is.

There was a crazy-ass little independent radio station on this particular island—or maybe they broadcasted from another nearby island. I never figured it out. But it was one of those weird, inexplicable little anomalies of expat behavior that you find from time to time if you travel enough: a tiny, one-lung radio station in the middle of nowhere. A DJ whose playlist made no damn sense at all, completely unpredictable selections ranging from the wonderful obscure to the painfully familiar. From lost classics of garage rock, ancient cult psychobilly hits, and pre-disco funk masterpieces to the most ubiquitously mundane medley of MOO mainstays or parrothead anthems—in a flash. No warning. One second, it’s Jimmy Buffet or Loggins and Messina—the next? The Animals’ “House of the Rising Sun” or Question Mark and the Mysterians’ “96 Tears.”

You never knew what was coming up. In the rare moments of lucidity, when I tried to imagine who the DJ might be and what his story was, I’d always picture the kid from *Almost Famous*, holed up, like me, in the Caribbean for reasons he’d probably rather not discuss; only in his case, he’d brought his older sister’s record collection circa 1972. I liked to imagine him out there in a dark studio, smoking weed and spinning records, seemingly at random—or, like me, according to his own, seemingly aimless, barely under control, and very dark agenda.

That’s where I was in my life: driving drunk and way too fast, across a not very well

Caribbean island. Every night. The roads were notoriously badly maintained, twisting and poorly graded. Other drivers, particularly at that hour, were, to put it charitably, as likely to be just as drunk as I was. And yet, every night, I pushed myself to go faster and faster. Life was reduced to a barely heard joke—a video game I'd played many times before. I'd light up the joint, crank up the volume, peel out of the parking lot, and it was game on.

Here was the fun part: after making it past the more heavily trafficked roads of the Dutch side, after successfully managing to cross the unlit golf course (often over the green) and the ruins of the old resort (flying heedlessly over the speed bumps), I would follow the road until it began to twist alongside the cliffs' edges approaching the French side. Here, I'd really step on the gas, and it was at precisely this point that I'd hand over control to my unknown DJ. For a second or two each night, for a distance of a few feet, I'd let my life hang in the balance, because, depending entirely on what song came on the radio next, I'd decide to either jerk the wheel at the appropriate moment, continuing, however recklessly, to careen toward home—homeward—or simply straighten the fucker out and shoot over the edge and into the sea.

In this way, my life could easily have ended with a badly timed playing of Loggins and Messina. On one memorable occasion, as I waited in the brief millisecond of silence between songs, foot on the gas, the cliff edge coming up at me fast, I was saved by the Chambers Brothers. I recognized the “tic-toc” metronome of “Time Has Come Today” and, at the last second, turned away from empty air, laughing and crying at the wonderfulness and absurdity of it all, diverted from what I very much felt to be my just desserts, making (momentarily) some strange and profound sense. Saving my life.

So. That's how I was feeling that year. And that's the kind of smart, savvy, well-considered decision-making process that was the norm for me.

Back in New York, I was living in a small, fairly grim Hell's Kitchen walk-up apartment that smelled of garlic and red sauce from the Italian hero joint downstairs. As I'd pretty much burned down my previous life, I didn't own much. Some clothes. A few books. A lot of Southeast Asian bric-a-brac. I was seldom there, so it didn't seem to matter. My favorite dive bar, where I was on permanent “scholarship,” was right down the street.

I was not seeing anybody regular. I wasn't looking for love. I wasn't even looking for sex. I wasn't in a frame of mind to take the initiative with anybody. Yet, if you brushed up against me in those days, I'd probably go home with you if you asked.

Business took me to England now and again, and one night, surely drunk again, sitting at the bar of a particularly disreputable “club,” waiting to meet someone from my publishers, I noticed a very beautiful woman staring at me in the mirror over my shoulder. While this was of moderate interest, it did not cause me to get off my bar stool, wink, nod, wave, or stare back. I had a pretty good sense by now of my unsuitability when it came to normal human interactions. I felt as if I'd had my thermostat removed—was without a regulator. I couldn't be trusted to behave correctly, to react appropriately, or to even discern what normal was. Sitting there, hunched over my drink, I knew this—or sensed it—and was trying to avoid any contact with the world not based on business. But an intermediary—the woman's friend—took matters into her own hands, suddenly at my shoulder insistent on making introductions.

The woman and I got to know each other a little—and from time to time, over the next few months, we'd see each other in England and in New York. After a while, I came

understand that she was from a very wealthy family—that she kept an apartment in New York. That she spent her days mostly traveling to runway shows and buying things with her mother. That she was of British, French, and Eastern European background, spoke four languages beautifully, was smart, viciously funny, and (at least) a little crazy—a quality usually liked in women.

Okay. She had a problem with cocaine—something I'd moved past. And her T-shirts cost more than the monthly salaries of everybody I ever knew. But I flattered myself that I was the one guy she'd ever met who really and truly didn't give a shit about her money or her bloodline or what kind of muddleheaded upper-class twits she moved with. With the righteousness of the clueless, I saw all that as a liability and behaved accordingly—making the comfortable assumption that when you're *that* kind of wealthy and privileged, the kind her friends seemed to be, you are necessarily simple-minded, ineffectual, and generally useless.

Suffering from the delusion that I was somehow “saving” this poor little rich girl, that surely she would benefit from a week on the beach, enjoying the simple pleasures of cold beer, a hammock, and local BBQ joints, I invited her to join me in the Caribbean over the Christmas holidays.

For the last few weeks, I'd lived friendless and alone down there. In a small but very nice rented villa. The island was largely funky and downscale and charmingly dysfunctional. It was half French, half Dutch—with plenty of social problems, working poor, and a large population of locals going back many generations, meaning there was life and business outside of the tourism industry, an alternate version of the island, where one could—if one so desired—get lost, away from one's own kind. I'd been weeks without shoes, eating every meal with my hands. Who wouldn't love that? I thought.

She came. And for just short of a week, we had a pretty good time. We were both hitting the Havana Club a little hard, for sure, but her presence certainly improved my behavior—my nightly attempts at suicide ended—and I believed that I was good for her as well. She seemed, for a while, genuinely happy and relaxed on the island's out-of-the-way beaches. Perfectly satisfied, it appeared to me, with a routine of inexpensive johnnycake sandwiches and roadside pork ribs grilled in sawed-off fifty-five-gallon drums. She took long swims by herself, emerging from the water looking beautiful and refreshed. I thought, surely this is a good thing. Maybe we are good for each other.

We drank at sailor bars, took mid-afternoon naps, mixed rum punches with a frequency that, over time, became a little worrisome. She was damaged, I knew. Like me, I thought—flattering myself.

I identified with her distrust of the world. But as I would come to learn, hers was a kind of damage I hadn't seen before.

“Let's go to St. Barths,” she said, one afternoon.

This was an idea that held little attraction for me. Even then, in my state of relative blissful ignorance, I knew that St. Barths, which lay about ten miles offshore from my comfortably dowdy island, was not somewhere I could ever be happy. I knew from previous day trips that a hamburger and a beer cost fifty bucks—that there was no indigenous culture.

to speak of, that it was the very height of the holiday season and the island, not my scene. Under the best of circumstances, would be choked with every high-profile douche, Euro-douch wannabe, and oligarch with a mega-yacht. I knew enough of the place to know that St. Barth was not for me.

I made obliging, generically willing-sounding noises, fairly secure in the assumption that every rental car and hotel room on the island had been booked solid. A few calls confirmed this to be the case, and I felt that surely she'd drop the idea.

She would in no way, she insisted, be deterred by insignificant details like no place to stay and no way to get there. There was a house. Russian friends. Everything would work out.

It certainly wasn't love that compelled me to abandon all good sense and go somewhere I already hated with somebody I barely knew into circumstances of great uncertainty. It was not a period of my life marked by good decisions, but in agreeing to "pop over" to St. Barth I'd made a particular whopper of a wrong turn—a plunge into the true heart of darkness. Maybe I saw it at the time as the path of least resistance, maybe I even thought there was indeed some small possibility of a "good time"—but I surely had reason to know better. I do know better. But I walked straight into the grinder anyway.

We took a small propeller plane the ten minutes or so across the water, landing at the airport with no ride, no plans, no friends I was aware of, and no place to stay. A famous guy said hello to my friend by the luggage carousel. They exchanged witty banter. He did not, however, offer to let us crash at his place. There were no taxis in sight.

From a comfortable rented villa on a nice island, where—despite my nightly flirtation with vehicular homicide and suicide—I was at least able to swim, eat and drink fairly cheaply, and eventually sleep securely in my own bed, I now found myself suddenly homeless. Worse, my partner, as I quickly discovered, was a spoiled, drunk, and frequently raving paranoid-schizophrenic.

And cokehead. Did I mention that?

Any pretense that mysterious Russian friends with a villa would be there for us had somehow dematerialized somewhere on the flight over. Similar departures from reality would become a regular feature of the next few days. After a long time, we found a taxi to the hotel—where, once the staff laid eyes on my mysterious but increasingly mad companion, a room was hastily made available for a night. A very expensive room.

One of the things I'd forgotten about seriously wealthy people, something I'd noticed during a brief previous exposure in college, was that the old-school, old-money kind of rich people? Those motherfuckers don't pay for shit. They don't carry cash—and even credit cards seem always to be ... somewhere else, as if whatever small sums as might be needed are beneath notice or discussion. Better *you* pay. And pay I did. Days and nights bingeing on overpriced drinks, bribing bartenders to scoop us up in their private vehicles at end of shift and drive us off into the dark to wherever she thought we might stay that night. One crappy motel-style room after another that cost what a suite at the St. Regis would. More drinks.

By now, I was a prisoner of her escalating and downright scary mood swings and general bad craziness. She'd turn on a dime from witty and affectionate to hissing, spitting psychotic. One minute we'd be having overpriced mojitos on a lovely beach, the next, she'd be raging

the manager, accusing the busboy—or whoever was at hand—of stealing her cell phone. Fa was, she constantly misplaced her cell phone, her purse, anything of value she had. She'd g sloshed, forgetful, impulsively run off to dance, to search for coke, to say hello to an o friend—and she'd lose track of shit. She'd forget where she'd put things—if she'd ever ha them in the first place.

I am not a fan of people who abuse service staff. In fact, I find it intolerable. It's a unpardonable sin as far as I'm concerned, taking out personal business or some other kind dissatisfaction on a waiter or busboy. From the first time I saw that, our relationship w essentially over. She accused me of "caring about waiters more than I cared about her," and she was right. From that point on, I was babysitting a madwoman—feeling obliged only t get her crazy ass on a plane and back to England as quickly as possible and with as litt damage done as could be managed. I'd gotten her here, allowed this to happen, it wa impingent on me, I felt, to at least get her back in one piece. This was easier said than done.

People were afraid of her. I noticed this early on.

She *had* mentioned something earlier, back in England, about an ex-boyfriend who supposedly "stalked" her. How Mom had had to call some "friends" to "talk to" the fellow question. How there'd been no problems after that. Somehow I'd blown right past *th* flashing red warning light, too—along with all the others. Now, all I wanted to do was g her on a plane back to London, but it was like reasoning with a wild animal. She didn't wa to go. Wouldn't go.

By now, middle of the night, she'd jack the volume on the TV all the way up and flic rapidly back and forth between news stations, raving about oil prices. Strangely, neith neighbors nor management ever dared complain. I went to sleep each night not knowi where we'd sleep the next, if I'd wake up in bed soaked with blood of indeterminate origi afraid to open my eyes to find out if the girl had cut her wrists—or my throat. I tried, real tried to act as I thought one does with a genuinely crazy person: solicitous, like a gentlem —until one can get 'em safely back in the bughouse. But she'd dragoon people into helping —strangers and distant acquaintances who seemed to like the idea of chauffeuring around crazed heiress and giving her cocaine. She crashed parties, jumped lines, scarfed grams will, a magnet for indulgent enablers, reptilian party-throwers.

"What does she do?" I heard one admiring bystander ask of another as my room bounded, gazelle-like, across the dance floor toward the bathroom—there, no doubt, to fi her nostrils.

"Nothing," was the answer. As if this was the proudest profession of all.

Apparently familiar with her rapier wit, her way with a lasting cruel remark, those wh knew her from St. Tropez, from Monaco, from Sardinia—wherever fuckwits and famebal went that year—they cowered at her approach. No one stood up to her.

Maybe it was because they all hated each other. (It seemed the point of the who exercise.) I soon found out that to move in this woman's poisonous orbit was to willing attach oneself to a sinister global network of Italian art collectors, creepy Russian oligarch horny Internet billionaires, the wrinkled ex-wives of Indonesian despots, princelings fro kingdoms that long ago ceased to exist, mistresses of African dictators, former-hooker

turned-millionairesses, and the kind of people who like hanging around with such people—who make their living doing so. All seemed to have come to St. Barths over the holidays in order to find subtle new ways to say “fuck you” to each other. With a smile, of course.

We spent a somewhat less than romantic New Year’s Eve at a party hosted by the Gaddafi family. That should tell you something. Enrique Iglesias provided the entertainment. A detail that lingers in the memory like the birthmark on one’s torturer’s cheek.

Who had the bigger boat, wore the better outfit, got the best table seemed all that mattered. There were decade-old feuds over casual cracks long forgotten by everyone but the principals. They circled each other still—waiting to identify a weakness—looking for a weakness somewhere and some way to strike. People jockeyed for position, cut each other’s throats over the most petty, nonsensical shit imaginable. This from the people who, it gradually began to dawn on me, actually ran the world.

I was lingering over the buffet on a Dr. No-size yacht with the appropriately Bond-esque name *Octopus*: huge interior docking inside the hull, a six-man submarine, landing space for two helicopters, Francis Bacon originals in the crapper. I looked up from the sushi and got the impression that anybody there—any of the guests dancing, schmoozing, chatting politely at the party—would have watched my throat getting cut without the slightest change in expression.

By the time she lost her wallet for the third and last time, I was ready to dig a hole in the sand and drop her in it—had I thought for a second I could get away with it. But she spoke daily with “Mom.” And the option of simply walking out on her, leaving the wallet-less, fun-less, coke-crazy schizo-bitch to her just deserts, broke-ass in a hotel room from which I had every expectation she would be removed at any hour—this, too, I was uncomfortable with.

I also had a very real concern that even were I to do something as measured and sensible as simply walk out on her, what remained of my Caribbean sojourn might end with the arrival of two thick-necked fellows from Chechnya holding a tarpaulin and hacksaws.

I was a bad person in a bad place, with another bad person, surrounded by other, possibly even worse people.

The French, who administered this playground of evil, who serviced its visitors, knew the customers well and catered to them, accommodated them, gouged them, and fucked them over in all the traditional ways—and a few new ones. Sit down for a burger at a beach bar and suddenly the music starts thump-thumping and here come the models with swimwear for sale—or jewelry. It was a bottleservice world—meaning, you pay for the table, not what’s on it. Unless, of course, you’re like my companion, who had a way of looking confused at the suggestion that *anyone* would pay for *anything*—much less her. Fiftyish men with potbellies hanging out over their Speedos danced with pneumatic-breasted Ukrainian whores—during brunch. Over-groomed little dogs in diamond chokers snapped and barked at one’s heels. Waiters looked at everyone with practiced expressions of bemused contempt.

There was, however, one glimmer of light—or inspiration—in all this darkness:

One man on the island understood better than anyone the world my companion moved in. An artist, a genius—a man who stood alone in his ability, the sheer relish with which he fucked the rich. Let’s call him, for the purposes of this discussion, Robèrt, the man who took

sample content of Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook
(P.S.)

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