

FREE CHAPTER

ONCE YOU'VE DONE A MEAL, YOU HAVE TO BE DEAD TO GET OUT OF ANOTHER

About a decade ago I collapsed at my desk. It wasn't one of those glamorous Southern swoonings, but more like an ostrich losing its footing, squawking as it falls to the ground. Co-workers ceased their typing for a moment then quickly returned to task at hand.

In a newsroom, it's not all that unusual for one of us to topple and completely fall apart. Such is the nature of the business when deadlines are involved and editors' demands are shouted over the din of clacking keyboards and deafening phone conversations.

It was just after 5 p.m. the day I kilt over, and I was sitting there feeling fine, waiting on a paycheck and for people to return my calls. I'd eaten a big lunch, and hours later, put in maybe 10 minutes on a treadmill, which for me is as good as it gets.

It's funny how you can be sitting there in perfect health, then something will wash right over you signaling an imminent death. This is exactly what happened as my hands tingled and went numb, followed by a battery-acid taste in my mouth. I knew right then, this was IT. It was my time to meet Jesus or the other fellow. Only I wasn't ready because people were counting on me to provide a meal, my first that included in-laws and expectations.

"Tracy," I sputtered weakly, beseeching the kind spirit of the young woman seated across from me. "Call 911. I'm dying."

Tracy Mixson was a copy editor who had First Aid training and once even drove to Florida to help Hurricane Andrew victims. She rushed over

and took my pulse and dialed an ambulance. It seemed she was on the phone a long time answering too many questions.

“She’s in her 30s. That's right. Eggplant Parmesan for lunch... Yes... A pink Flintstone vitamin, a prescription for sleep problems.”

“Get off the phone,” I demanded, as only the dying have a right to do. For some reason, I forgot that dispatchers aren't the ones who actually get in the ambulance and race to the scene. I imagined them asking Tracy questions while the clock ticked away precious moments of life. “Please! Get off the phone so they can get here faster.”

Mixson remained calm and efficient, flicking away long strands of her straight black hair. “They’re sending a crew, Susan. Calm down. It’s not who’s on the phone that’s coming. Breathe into this bag and you’ll quit twitching.”

As another attack swooped, she held my hand and talked me into staying alert. And alive. Breathe in the bag, hear it crinkle; breathe out, watch it inflate, until a moment later it was over and I felt fine, even a bit stupid. I was, in my mind, a ridiculous woman.

“Call them back and tell them not to come. It was probably just a panic attack.” I knew that's what it was because I had one 20 years ago while working as a news intern and the psycho coroner had shown me a severed hand floating in a bucket at the morgue. “Really, Tracy. Call them back, OK?”

But it was too late, and sirens screamed as if a fire raged or a robbery was in progress or a bear was stuck in a tree somewhere in our fair city. No one would have thought such a shrill cry for help was for a silly woman with lipstick up to her nose and high heels flung under a desk. Not for a woman more worried about the pot roast cooking at home than her blood sugar

levels and potentially fatal EKGs. Not for a woman thinking, “Will English peas go with the roast or would limas taste better?”

The entire attack had been the direct result of buying a chuck roast on sale for \$1.49 a pound and then breaking out the Crock Pot and tossing in some Lipton’s Onion Soup mix and water. These were the actions of an over-confident woman who should have stuck to Tuna Helper with potato chips on top for extra zip.

A slight day of mania pushed forth the confidence to ask my in-laws to dinner, and all I could think about was the chuck roast and whether was shriveling to the size of a burned biscuit. Would it serve four? Would the corners turn in like bad toenails?

I had been married for years, but only cooked for them on occasions. One memorable being my zucchini lasagna, which didn’t go over well with my father-in-law who plucked out all the zucchini slices and stacked them like a tower on his plate, explaining, “I don’t eat cucumbers.”

My time to have them to dinner again was long overdue, and I knew if I went to the hospital they would think I was trying to get out doing the cooking. That’s what I would think if my daughter-in-law asked me to dinner and she suddenly called out of the blue complaining of a heart attack while at her workplace.

I’d think, “Hmm. She doesn’t have a bad heart. She just isn’t up to cooking. Why, faking heart attacks to get out of serving a meal is the oldest trick in the book.”

The thought was interrupted by a team of six men in uniforms rushing into the building holding giant orange medical boxes by their sides.

“Go tell them to wait in the hall, Tracy. I don’t want them stomping in here and causing a commotion. Everybody already thinks I’m a freak.”

“You could be in the midst of a myocardial infarction,” she said. “You’ve got to take these seriously, Susan. My cousin had one and is now wearing a Pacemaker and is never far from the de-fib paddles. He can’t get anywhere near a microwave or he’ll explode.”

“I need to put on some lipstick,” I said, not wanting to hear about bodily hardware and electrical jumpstarting. After a few minutes of rummaging around on the floor, I found my purse, reapplied a coat and recovered my shoes flung halfway across the aisle.

“Tell the PMS people I’ll meet them in the snack shop. Remember, I don’t want to cause a scene.”

“EMS. EMS People,” Tracy said. “Listen, it’s no big deal. You’ve already caused one scene, but I’ll take them to the snack bar so try to make it there without incident. Take the elevator, not the stairs.”

I walked into the room, clackety-clacking and smiling with big rust-colored lips. They asked tough questions.

“Do you know what day of the week it is?”

“Do you know what year this is?”

For a while, I said nothing. Finally, I answered. “It’s Tuesday, the 20th century, b.c.,” wanting, but not daring to add, “And I’ve got a roast drying to shreds in my Crock Pot because I forgot to throw in a cup of water.”

They escorted me to an ambulance, checked vitals and pricked my finger. About twenty minutes later they had me hooked to the EKG machine, one of them no doubt seeing and checking out my dirty and tattered bra with the underwires springing out like metal tongues from the cups. They read wavy pieces of paper that showed my heartbeats zooming up and down like rows of mountains.

“You’ve got some PVCs,” one said.

“Huh?”

“PVCs. Quite a run of them.”

“Aren’t those pipes you use to install toilets?”

“Preventricular contractions,” one said, smiling. “Irregular heartbeat. Anything happening that would have brought this on?”

Well, let’s see. “I’m having the in-laws for dinner. I’m not much of a cook, see, and my roast is drying to kibble. I’m sure by the time I get home and serve the thing, my kin will need to grow another row of teeth just to bite through it. That or a chainsaw.”

The kind crew suggested we go to the hospital for further testing, but I said there was no way in the world I had time to go.

“If I don’t serve that roast tonight...this very night...you can’t possibly understand the consequences, the talk that will occur behind my back. See, my in-laws don’t think I don’t do a damn thing but bring home McDonald’s every night for the family or live off the Tuna and Hamburger Helpers. This was my chance to show them I do know my way around one or two kitchen devices.”

“Well, your heart is – ”

“My heart will absolutely shut down all valves if I don’t serve some beef to a certain set of carnivores tonight. I promise to call the cardiologist tomorrow for an appointment.”

Reluctantly, they radioed in to the hospital to pretty much say they’d wasted a trip and priceless gas on a woman who clearly had no intentions on seeing the inside of the ER.

“Patient refuses transport,” they said.

“I’m sorry,” I told them. “I hope you don’t get a commission on how many you bring in.”

I couldn't tell them the real reason I didn't want "transport." How can you explain to men in uniform and draped in life-saving devices that a Southern woman planning dinner for in-laws is NOT going to check herself into the local hospital?

I signed a waiver and hurried home to boil a bag of Minute Rice, put on a pot of Ford Hook limas and douse my dried but edible roast in water, hoping it would bloat a bit.

Because I managed to pull this meal off, even serving it with a Sara Lee cheesecake that had them all raving, it was only fitting they chose me to take over the Thanksgiving holiday meal, a torch they'd been dying to pass for at least half a dozen years. Who could blame them? There comes a time when no one over 60 wants to do every holiday meal thus they hunt for someone to take on the enormous task.

Looking back, I should have allowed transport to the nearest emergency room and let the roast disintegrate.

CROCK POT ROAST

Buy a chuck roast. Make sure to get a lean one unless you like fat. Make sure also to buy a large one because they shrink substantially during cooking.

Put the roast in the Crock Pot on slow, all-day cooking. Usually 6 to 8 hours, unless one has to spend time in an ambulance or other unforeseen emergency situation. Remember, the longer it cooks, the more it will shrivel up. So don't be cheap. Spend the extra two dollars on a larger cut of meat.

Add at least two cups of water and one pack of Lipton's Onion Soup mix.

Flip the roast if you're around. If not, have someone do the flipping for you.

ROLLS

Buy a bag of whole wheat rolls unless your kin are like some of mine and believe God created wheat solely to make white bread.

LIMAS

Buy a bag of Ford Hook limas, the extra large beans. Or if eating limas the size of small mice isn't appetizing, buy the baby limas. Cook both for a long time. Season with butter, salt and pepper. Southerners don't like things unless they mush in their mouths.

DESSERT

Visit your grocer's frozen food section and choose anything you can just thaw out.