

## Anniversary

By Hilary Davidson

He had spent all afternoon shopping and now he was late. He'd envisioned having dinner ready for Helen at seven, the two of them toasting with a twenty-four-year-old Bordeaux. The wine was from the year Helen was born, a fact he knew she would appreciate. Only now, with the clock ticking and the water on the stove refusing to boil, he realized he'd never make it. The thought made the santoko knife quiver and slide right out of his hand as he tried to dice an onion. It clattered against the granite counter and dropped, the seven-inch blade embedding itself in the floorboards not an inch from his foot. He crouched to pry it free by the handle, leaving a thin scar on the varnished wood. He set the santoko on a dishtowel and got another Japanese knife out of a drawer. *Steady hands*, he reminded himself. This just wasn't like him. He didn't trust anything but cautious, painstaking planning. The devil was always in the details, like his father said. Lack of preparation only invited disaster.

He knew that and still the devil had tripped him up that afternoon. He'd started out with a shopping list culled from his mother's recipe for Lobster Thermidor, and he'd mapped out the route he planned to follow. But somewhere between picking up fresh tarragon for the béchamel sauce and choosing fresh lobsters, he realized that he hadn't actually bought an anniversary gift for Helen. True, the wine was specially selected for her, and he had already given her that goddess-like long blue dress that would make her look like Rita Hayworth in *Down to Earth* at dinner that night. But he didn't have a bow-topped box for her to unwrap with barely concealed greed.

He knew Helen had a frivolous side; he had watched her while she shopped at the holiday market in Grand Central Station, trying on sparkly necklaces and rings that made her lips part and eyes widen with desire. But it was January now and the market was gone and he wasn't sure where to go. He'd stood in the Essex Street Market, sweat trickling down his back even though it was a cold day. Then it hit him, the place that Holly Golightly went to shed the mean reds. What was the movie called? *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. He'd already come into Manhattan to shop, he reasoned, so why not make the trek to Midtown? He was angry at himself for not thinking of it earlier, when he would have had the luxury of shopping online. Instead, grocery bags in hand, he took the subway up to Fifty-Ninth Street and spent the longest twenty-two minutes of his life peering into locked glass cases and feeling despair as voices in a dozen tongues crowded his thoughts right out of his head. It embarrassed him that the salesmen were better dressed than he was, that they were able to turn a polished *Can I help you, sir?* into an insult. But their smirks had given way to slack jaws when he had pointed to a white-gold bracelet and paid for it with cash.

The money didn't matter, but the cost in time made him frantic. With the trip up and then back to the market for the lobsters, he'd lost more than an hour, and the train home to Brooklyn stopped twice without explanation. He had raced home from the station, slipping twice on glare ice. Only after he got to his house and locked the front door behind him did he feel some of the pressure lift off his chest. Before he'd even taken off his coat, he'd ducked into the old-fashioned parlor, poured two fingers of scotch from the sideboard and belted it down. He poured two more and carried the tumbler into

the kitchen. *Company while I'm cooking*, he told himself. He didn't want Helen to see him drunk. That could get messy.

He'd shrugged off his coat and tossed it on a chair, ignoring the blinking light of the message machine on the countertop. Its red eye meant one thing to him: tenants with complaints, none of which he wanted to deal with now. He was a veterinarian by training and inclination – he'd always preferred animals to people – but when his parents died, they had left their only child their Brooklyn home and the three brownstones they owned. Upkeep and maintenance was a full-time job, he'd found. Four years back, when the responsibility for the buildings landed on his shoulders, he'd tried to hire out the work. He quickly learned that people didn't give a damn about doing things properly. Maybe they never had, but watching old movies had left him with the impression that times really were better when Jimmy Stewart was young. Everything had gone downhill since then, including the quality of Manhattan tenants. Just yesterday he'd had to waste an afternoon snaking a series of sinks because one overpaid Wall Street nitwit had installed a garbage disposal unit and dumped what looked like a dozen Chinese takeout containers into it. The backlog had shot back through the pipes and into two neighbors' kitchen sinks. It was this kind of thing that drove a man to drink.

But not tonight. He took a sip of scotch and forced himself to put the tumbler down. This was his night, his and Helen's, their two-week anniversary. He knew people might laugh at him for being such a cornball about it, but he couldn't help himself. He had been in love with her for so many quiet, hopeless months. She was fifteen years younger than him, graceful and beautiful and kind. He hadn't even believed it the first time she'd smiled at him. That had been last summer and, even though it was a happy memory, it made his heart constrict. He wasn't a man for whom lovely women often spared smiles. Helen had been dating one of his tenants then, a soulless bond trader who had the neighbors complaining about his loud music and late-night parties. That was one face that wasn't missed around the building, he was sure.

He checked the water and vinegar in the stockpot and decided that it could pass for a rolling boil. He had always loved cooking for the discipline and precision it demanded, but tonight he was too unsettled to take pleasure from it. He threw the two lobsters into the pot, put the lid on, and immediately felt guilty. When he cooked a lobster he normally took the time to hypnotize it first, a trick he'd learned from his father. *They like the hot water*, his father had told him. He was old enough to know that wasn't actually true, but he held on to the custom of rubbing the space between their antennae to lull them into accepting their fate. There was no sense in being unnecessarily cruel, not to an animal, anyway, he thought. Still, it was too late to do anything about it now.

At least the béchamel sauce was doing alright. The flour had finally melded with the scalded milk, and a *bouquet garni* was simmering next to the diced vegetables. If he was quick about it he could take a moment to make himself presentable. There was so much to do – candles to light, a table to set, lights to be turned down low and music turned on – but he didn't want Helen seeing him looking a mess. He raced upstairs just as the phone started to ring, which reminded him that he needed to unplug it. *So much to do*, he thought as he pulled off his sweater and pants in the doorway of his bedroom. He took a white shirt out of the closet, buttoned up the front and reached for a gray suit. It was a double-breasted number that Cary Grant might have worn. He had a wardrobe full of fine clothes and few occasions to wear them. Still, it paid to be prepared. He'd had

the suit freshly pressed a couple of days before, and had already selected a paisley tie and knotted cufflinks to go with it, so there was no moment of indecision now. He grabbed the accessories and a well-polished pair of wingtips and headed back to the kitchen.

The tricky thing with Lobster Thermidor, he knew from experience, was timing. He took a large pair of tongs out of a drawer and pulled the lobsters out of the pot, one after the other. He grabbed the first claw and twisted it right around. It came away with the knuckles attached as it was supposed to, but the water that squirted out scalded his hand. He twisted the other claws off and put them back in the pot. He ran his hands under cold water and swore softly. *Battle wounds*, he would tell Helen over dinner. *Battle wounds, earned for you*. He knew it sounded hokey but it might make her laugh, and he loved to hear her laugh.

He gulped down more scotch, then got a mixing bowl and whisked together the egg yolks and cream. He wondered if Helen was as nervous as he was. He'd had crushes before but had never been in love. For a long time he'd wondered whether there might be something wrong with him. Then Helen had come along and shown him that he was capable of love – deep, abiding love, the kind they made movies about. Even when that love was unrequited, as it had been at one time with Helen, he was steadfast and loyal. He finished his drink and got another bottle of scotch out of the cupboard. He opened it up and made a generous pour before letting it be. It would wait till he finished cooking.

By the time he had deveined the lobster, cracked the claws, and set the meat into a baking dish with the béchamel, it was close to eight. He sprinkled some grated Parmesan over the dish and put it into the oven to cook. He sat down for the first time since coming home, put on his shoes and fastened the cufflinks. There was a mirror in the hallway just outside the kitchen. He took his tie and his glass, which he set on the table while he fussed with getting the knot right. He looked at himself and smiled shyly. He knew he was no Cary Grant, but he wasn't half bad. A little on the short side, maybe, but he'd lifted weights for two decades and had a powerful body, corded with muscle. His face was pleasant looking, his mother had always said; from certain angles you didn't even notice his lazy eye. He ran a hand through his dark, wavy hair and tilted his head to the side. Then he remembered the phone. He unplugged it and put it in a drawer, then went back to the mirror, and belted down the scotch. He picked up the Tiffany's bag, unlocked the door to the basement and went downstairs.

"Is that you?" Helen called out in a tentative voice. She was sitting on the heart-shaped pink bed in the center of the room, wearing the blue dress that left one shoulder bare and cascaded over the other with its fine, shimmery fabric. Her resemblance to Rita Hayworth never failed to take his breath away. Auburn hair, creamy skin and blue eyes. A slender dancer's body that was delicate and lithe.

"Y-y-y-yes," he stammered. Then he remembered to smile. Helen smiled back at him as he moved closer. She closed her book and put it on the bedside table. "*F-f-f-for y-y-you*," he said, handing her the Tiffany's bag. It wasn't as grand as what he'd meant to say but he didn't mind that when he saw Helen's megawatt smile.

"You're wonderful," she said. "You're the most thoughtful man in the world. Thank you, darling." She set the bag down without opening it. She looked at him and her smile retreated. "I think... I think I'm bleeding again. Would you please take a look?" She held out her bare legs and he noticed that the bandages on her ankles were freshly red. The cuts should have been healed up by now; it occurred to him that Helen

might be poking and prodding at the tendons to make them look worse than they really were. “I’m so worried about it,” she said. “I think I really need to see a doctor. It might be infected.”

He stroked her feet and nodded absently. There was a doctor he knew, a tenant who’d had some problems with self-prescribed pharmaceuticals. Perhaps he’d call him later; perhaps it wouldn’t be necessary.

“Would you take me to the hospital?” said Helen in a soft voice. “Please, darling.”

He kissed the instep of her left foot and then her right. “*T-t-t-time f-f-for d-d-d-dinner*,” he said. He reached down and picked Helen up. She was so light and so fragile. He held her in his arms for a moment before he kissed her on the lips. He noticed a tear running down her cheek when he pulled his head back slightly to look at her. “*I-I-I-I love y-y-you*.” It amazed him that he never stuttered when he said *love*. It was the one word that never tripped him up.

“I love you, too,” said Helen, closing her eyes.

He picked up the Tiffany’s bag – she could open it later – and let it dangle from one arm as he carried Helen up the stairs. It wasn’t true that a person couldn’t walk after her Achilles tendon was cut; one lost the ability to propel oneself forward, but slow, mincing steps were possible. Stairs were another matter: Helen would have had to crawl to get up the steps by herself. But she would never have to do that because he’d always be there to carry her. It was the sort of detail another man might overlook, but that had never been his style.

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