

Recipe

For once, it shines in the future: success, yours. Even as you prepare for it you can't help rehearsing it as a memory to tell others. The invitations have been sent, the food bought; time to set the scene: the chef's apartment approached by five flights of inviting stairs, the simple, classic layout: the pea-green walls of the living room communicating with the orange and blue of the kitchen/dinette. Not perfect, but all significant accomplishment requires obstacles.

And, six months after your wife has left you, there are also obstacles getting back into the social swing of things, mixing it up with a few friends, those that still speak to you, the two who haven't chosen sides with Louise, your soon-to-be ex. Of course there are always the folks at the diner, nice enough to have worked with for eleven years, but hard to imagine sitting around a formal table, dabbing their chins with napkins. Oh, they know what gourmet food is, but not how to enjoy it properly, therefore risky to invite. The exception is the owner, unavailable, enjoying his vacation in Montreal. Beth and Madeleine with their significant others it will be, then. A coming-out party of sorts, from the obscurity of the fifth floor to the vibrant world of Nouvelle Cuisine.

"You've never cooked a real meal in your life," Louise declared (and to you, a cook!) when you suggested making dinner, just that once. True, you were too proud to mount a defense consisting of your repertoire, poached eggs on hash, meatloaf, meals requiring less skill than a

counter-argument might necessitate. Ah, Louise, so difficult to please in the kitchen of your marriage: how hard could a recipe be? Follow one, follow them all.

You review yours, remembering your wife has not been the only skeptic. Your mother's voice from the past: "We still have a full package of unsweetened chocolate in the pantry," she shouted at you from that very location. "What did you use?" Even in childhood, your brownies failed.

But that was then. This is now.

Always, always examine your motives, it is said, especially by those who question them. And so you have. Why *these* guests? Simple: Madeleine and Beth are equally your friends *and* Louise's, therefore the most likely to report your enviable success back to your wife of too many years.

Ah, yes, you will admit that in Madeleine's case there may be an ulterior motive (her name was first on the guest list). *How do you think it makes me feel when you can't take your eyes off her?*—Louise's indelible words. But you've taken care, knowing it would be a precarious situation in lesser hands. Unfortunately, it meant having to invite her husband—her soon to be ex-husband, you've heard from her own lips: "We've outgrown each other. Too bad you and I didn't collide earlier in life." Madeleine said this to you a year ago. One of those moments accounting for more than a few fantasies. But beware the marital superego, Louise's view of Madeleine. A woman mocked by your ex, so to speak, makes of that person an automatic candidate on one level, but one not likely to make it to the short list, since your ex had to have had good taste at one time in her life and can't have lost it merely on account of increased marital squabbling. Nevertheless, don't go overboard, just because what you really want is to

have a broiling affair, take glorious color pictures of your delirious happiness standing on the docks of picturesque harbors to mail off to Louise. Just kidding.

Beth is another kettle of fish, enamored of you, alas. She's the kind of person men love to dislike and women are always fond of. Meaning she's a really nice person—if only she didn't have to show it all the time. The way she has of tipping her head to one side and smiling ear to ear at the mere mention of misfortune, a solicitous mom consoling an infant after a scrape of the knee. But she's very impressionable, and according to Louise a marvelous cook, so she'll be appreciative.

Now, where were we? *Oh damn!* The lobsters are boiling all over the stove—how long were they supposed to be in there?

*

Already, it's the next day, the day of the party, so time to get down to business. Recipes can be so trying, the worst parts the footnotes referring to another place in the book—see page 425, that sort of thing. Where, now in the middle of a concoction already complicated enough, you are confronted with another whole recipe before you can continue on the course you thought you were on.

Boil four lobsters until pink, then discard, saving the broth.

This you did yesterday, a good thing, too, by the look of these excursions. You wonder if, in this hot muggy weather, it might have been better to refrigerate the lobsters after boiling them, even though they're no longer needed. No time for that now.

Sear one fist-sized piece of tenderloin, then chop into quarter-inch cubes. Sautee five good-sized truffles (use only the genuine French). When the truffles regain their moisture but are not overdone, add the broth to the mixture. Boil down to, roughly, a half saucepan's worth. Add the tenderloin cubes and stir till thick. Reheat until creamy and pour into an Acadian phyllo shell (see page 520).

This they should have told you earlier. So while the thing you've just made is coagulating, you now have to make miniature pastry, requiring a package of a million sheets of phyllo dough you don't have, available only in a market across town. Fortunately, you've reserved the whole day for this. On the bright side, the pastry errand will allow you to pick up the box of sea salt you forgot to buy yesterday, something good to come of the inconvenience.

Back in the kitchen, you've fashioned your little Greek masterpiece, having to use—after all that!—only five fragile sheets of phyllo dough. That you have had to defrost it has also set you back. Nevertheless, now that you have in your hot little hand what might serve as a hummingbird's nest, you reheat the concoction that has cost four innocent crustaceans their lives (not to mention the steer) and pour it gently into its new vessel, sealing the top with a wad of extra phyllo. There being no further treasure hunts into the later pages of the text, you are now free to return to the recipe proper, the end in sight.

Unfortunately, the second and third steps are revealed only after a turn of a page, requiring three and a half more hours. A pity, since a vegetable and a potato dish are to be the sides, yet to be prepared, your company due to arrive in less than two hours.

You hatch a new plan.

*

Why is Louise in your thoughts? She was calm in the kitchen. She never worked in a diner, that's why. What would she do now?

You, however, have had just enough time, before cleaning the kitchen, setting the table, before a shave and a shower, to run around the corner for the necessary ground round, breadcrumbs, carrots, and so on, to cook your signature meatloaf, allowing you to use as a garnish the phyllo concoction, which should brown nicely on top of it.

*

Things under control at last, the potatoes ready to boil then mash, the broccoli ready to steam, you head for the shower, applying afterward as a precaution the aftershave you've used only once, remembering too late it is the one Louise accused of being good only for masking unwanted cooking odors. Never mind, thanks to the meatloaf, the apartment is beginning to smell inviting. You never did get to the vacuum, but as we all know, the need for a clean apartment is exaggerated by most women. Suffice it to say that you are not one to let things go.

Ah, the doorbell. Madeleine, you hope. How will she be dressed? In the linen tunic, the one you made a point of complimenting just last week?

"Oh," Madeleine says, as she inspects the living room from the landing. She's out of breath as she looks in expectantly. Too bad she's brought what's-his-name with her, but what can you do? "Is that lobster I smell?" There are expectations in her voice that will not be denied. Also the problem that Madeleine's greeting has brought to mind—the lobsters, placed yesterday under the sink in the large boiler pot with the discarded broth. You could have made an elegant lobster salad out of the four creatures keeping the sink-drain company. Perhaps you could still

pull it off. Tricky—it would be tricky. And why is the smell of meatloaf now so much weaker than the lobster? A reason for concern, what with the stove's history of temperamental behavior.

“I'm always up for lobster.” It's Madeleine's husband this time—what's his name? You should have done the research on that. You'd ask him what he drinks, but there's nothing but Schlitz in the house. Which would go better with lobster than meatloaf.

It's becoming harder to smile properly. Hunger will do that to anyone.

*

For a moment you imagine yourself in your wife's body, gracefully attending to everyone, asking the right questions, passing round the hors d'oeuvres while you serve the drinks. “We did that well,” she said after one of your parties. Why this memory after all these years?

*

“Ah,” you say to Madeleine and her husband after everyone's ensconced in the sitting area, “the doorbell,” as if they were hard of hearing. You've been running back and forth to the kitchen trying to solve the problem there. *Fix yourselves a drink*, you want to say, remembering the Schlitz under the sink with the lobster. A single bottle, you remember now, the five others meeting their demise during yesterday's cooking episode. You remember the trip to and from the market to buy phyllo, passing a package store. Another opportunity missed.

“Is something wrong?”

Madeleine has asked this.

“Oh no,” you say, admiring her spit curls. You are taken with her, lost in thought, hearing the doorbell again. “No. Nothing’s wrong.” Paying attention to detail, when people allow you time for it, is what you do best.

And the doorbell once more.

Luckily, Joe and Beth have brought a bottle of wine, red from the looks of it.

“You shouldn’t have,” you say, taking the proffered bottle from Beth. You can tell by her smile that Beth has more than a little interest in you. You do not have a thing for her. “Carmen,” you and Madeleine once called her, if not to her face, after the eponymous cigarette girl from the famous opera you’ve never seen. Madeleine thought the nickname a howl. You loved it when she laughed over your joke, but you still wish for more affection from her, so it’s probably best not to dwell on what the future, after a long, drawn-out court battle, the inevitable bruises inflicted by the knowledgeable and willing lawyers (not to mention the friends lined up on both sides cheering on their respective clients) might hold.

“Come in,” you say, realizing you’re still standing at the door with Beth and Joe, trying to smile once again. Your smile still feels stiff, as if it must look like you smell something rotten, which is indeed the case, the fresh air of the stair landing acting as a palette cleanser to refresh the bouquet of an apartment far more redolent of lobster than you had thought. Oh dear: why lobster, not meatloaf?

“Well, here we are,” you say, “all six of us together,” which is followed by smirks and smiles. If Louise *were* only here. A brief aberration of thought, the pleasure of giving dinner parties as a couple. Suddenly, you are surrounded by your own mistakes. “And no one to blame

but yourself,” she’d say. She’s enjoying Montreal with the man you introduced her to last Christmas. Your boss. Seems like only yesterday.

“Oh? Who else is here?” asks the little cigarette girl.

“I meant five,” you say, holding up the bottle she and Joe have brought. “I assume we’d all like a glass?”

“I’d rather have a beer,” Joe, Beth’s unappreciated boyfriend, says. He’s short, his head shaved shiny like Louise’s darning egg.

“We’re doing our best,” you say, turning quickly toward the kitchen in case someone else wants one. It’s working out well so far. Who says there’s no god?

*

You’re back in the kitchen, wondering what to do with the lobsters, not to mention the meatloaf. Not to mention there being only broccoli and potatoes for a main course.

“Would you like some help?”

It’s Joe, here to remind you that you haven’t begun to pour the wine. He’d like a beer, you remember.

“Too bad that won’t have a chance to air,” he says about the wine, then, before you have a chance to agree with him, “Whew, that’s rich.” He looks skeptical, as if you’re wearing your wife’s magenta blouse and were unaware you’d put it on by mistake.

“The lobster. Yes.” What you really need is a surfeit of hard liquor for everyone. The situation is made worse when you open the door under the sink to retrieve the Schlitz and the full effect hits you.

“I don’t suppose you have a cold one,” Joe says.

“Oh shit,” you say, “I forgot to put them in the refrigerator,” hoping you can make the plural stick, therefore making the rest of the non-existent six pack appear as unappetizing as the bottle you are now handing Joe, along with the ice-filled glass you are assuring him goes well with beer.

In Montreal, Louise would be lifting a glass of sauvignon blanc to her lips about now. Toasting Fred the way she used to toast you.

Now, where were those wine glasses, and can you finish cooking a half-baked meatloaf? If you can figure out how to revive the stove. Something to do with faulty wiring, you seem to remember.

Joe wants to help, you can tell. Joe is one of those guys, rare in our day and age, who mates for life, or tries to. Early on. Problem is, it’s hard to find someone who also finds that goal compelling, and, finding it compelling, casts her glance in the wanted direction.

The first description Joe gave you of Beth was as if perfection were on offer.

“Tightly wrapped,” Madeleine said later, after Joe introduced her to you and Madeleine.

“Like a pack of Camels,” you said.

“A little cigarette girl,” Madeleine countered. So *Carmen* had nothing to do with it. It’s always good to review history to get a handle on it.

Oh, oh—a shout from the other room—from Ryan—that’s his name—Madeleine’s soon to be ex—“Have you found the beer?” No, and for good reason—don’t rub it in. Time to get out of the kitchen, the smell of lobster overpowering, at least to a sensitive nose like yours, although psychology does play a part in amplifying one sense over another, as the experts have shown.

Well, it's about time I let you in on a little secret. That's what you should say, but there may be subtler ways to confess this disaster, though you may not have to, the fragrance of meat loaf once again dominant, which means the stove has kicked back in. On-off, on-off. You just hope you can count on it to deliver the goods this once. How long do you leave a meatloaf in the oven if it cooks for ten minutes before the stove kicks out for twenty? You remember math questions like this when you were in high school, one train barreling toward another approaching at a different rate of speed. How long before they collide?

I have a confession, you should begin; why are confessions so difficult?

You can hear Louise now: "Why the fuck can't you ever admit you're wrong? That it's your fault, not the landlord's, not your boss Fred's, not the diner's stove, not your wife's. Why is that, do you suppose?" It's Louise's voice alright, though she's happily in Montreal with the guy who's responsible for this disaster, if not for the meal; though come to think of it, it wouldn't be wholly unfair to blame it on him, the cluelessness of your single state being due to his newest alliance, your wife. *You clueless bastard*, her favorite phrase.

"Who likes pizza?" A confession disguised as an innocent question. Until everyone laughs, Beth louder than anyone with that breath-knocked-out-of-her braying you can hear three blocks down. You don't care anymore, suffering again a vision of Louise beamed in from Montreal. She must be sitting in that restaurant you loved so much, a choice of four kinds of oysters—you can never remember their names—not their Christian names, of course, their species nicknames: Wellfleet, Blue Point, and so forth—but everyone's looking at you now as you try to concoct what Louise might be saying about you to her new friend. The one you introduced her to. Your boss. He's eating *your* oysters. Perhaps he's apologizing for something; she'd enjoy that.

You took Louise to Montreal that time. The best week of your marriage she called it.

Has anyone poured the wine? Now would be a good time to find out. A little wine would go a long way toward pulling things together. Oh, someone must have, Madeleine has a glass. Not much left in it...

“I have a confession,” you say to the assembled company: “There’s a very fine wood-oven pizza place two streets down.”

“That’s not a confession,” Madeleine says, “that’s a fact.”

Help. Help, help, help. How good it would be to offer help instead of need it.

When you get stuck this way, with four lobsters competing with the garbage for dominance, and four people you’ve invited to dinner, laughing over the meatloaf and wanting to go out for pizza—when you’re in a situation like this—why is it you think of nothing but the same old question? Why are *you* here, in *your* kitchen, the lone host of your party while being laughed at by the very people you are trying to impress and who will now have to take you out to dinner, your credit card maxed out and the cash on your person limited to the six singles in your wallet and a handful of coins in your pocket, change in this day and age no more valuable than the colored pebbles you collected in the innocence of your happy if confused childhood?

Yes. Why are you here? No, add one word to that: Why are you here *again*?

“It’s on us,” you hear someone say.

“What’s on us?” you ask, realizing it’s Beth, who now has that head-tilted-to-the-side motherly look women get when they want to take care of your poor, clueless soul. Still, it’s best, you think, to play dumb.

“On us?” you ask. “What’s on us?”

“You must have spent a wad on the lobsters,” Beth says. The corners of her mouth have stretched her lips thin, into what she must assume to be a smile. But she means well; take advantage of it. Here you are at another fork in the road, their offer winding off to the left, the right-hand path leading to a credit card refusal. Caught in a bind, who wouldn’t gaze past Beth’s inane topknot out the window in search of an answer?

“Just kidding,” you say. About what, you’re not sure.

“About what?” Beth asks, all care and attention, peering meaningfully into your face.

“Where’s Madeleine?” you respond.

“In the kitchen,” Beth says, “dealing with the lobster under the sink.” You wish she hadn’t said that, for obvious reasons.

“That’s really bad,” Madeleine says when she returns from the kitchen. “You’d better get it into the barrel first thing in the morning.” Even now, you’re taken with her, the perfectly sculpted hair as black and shiny as polished ebony, the trim slacks. “You know, if you’d only let down your guard a little, we’d make a perfect couple,” you said to her shamefacedly, at her own party not long ago. What a screw-up. Your only dinner party and you turn out to be a charity case. The room is beginning to spin.

“Yes, thank you,” you say, as Joe is leading you stiffly by the shoulder to a chair, “I can sit down by myself.”

During the confusion you remember these are Louise’s friends, too. “Friends don’t choose sides,” you pleaded, though you can’t remember to whom. “Keep in touch,” Madeleine said, a comment you’d have bet your future on, had Ryan not been at her side saying the same thing. “You know who you can call on for help,” Beth said. And they did agree to come to your fete with its cooked lobster in the garbage pail and the meatloaf congealing in grease. Not that

you promised those things. And didn't Madeleine say, "We wouldn't think of choosing sides." Or was it the little cigarette girl?

"Sure you don't want a doggie bag," you suggest flirtatiously to Madeleine, but she doesn't even smile. You're sinking fast. "I think I'll pass on that," she says. Your chances with Madeleine are slipping away.

You ask where they want to go, but no one is paying attention. You have no money. The money is running out, a fact Louise brought to your attention on more than one occasion. And, to be honest with yourself, the reason for Madeleine's sympathy. And Louise's. It wasn't all your fault.

"Everyone has bad days," Madeleine says, prying your hand away from your face. Her husband is sitting beside her, wanting no part of your freak show. *These days, it's manly to weep*, you want to tell him, but there's something about an armful of tattoos that makes a shoulder less sympathetic to cry on. The look on Beth's face, approaching a little too close for comfort, tells you she wants to hold you fast to her bosom. Good God, what have you done?

The four of them draw together into a huddle with you at the center. Madeleine's husband has his manly hand on your shoulder. "I'm okay," you say, the magic words that remove it.

"Let's go eat," you say now, though the thought of food would be more welcome during a revolt of the inner ear on the deck of a small vessel pitching wildly on the roiling sea. "I think I'm going to be sick," you say, which pushes the men away and the women in.

All you want is sleep.

*

As far as you can tell, the evening's over. You're lying on the couch, awake from a doze. You can't remember much. Only that you were a pathetic blob, a charity case...

The up side: nothing worse could happen, when you hear a knock on the door which opens on its own. Wearing your favorite perfume, Madeleine stares at you from the hall. She's come back to claim you.

"This must be a dream," you say. "Pinch me."

And someone does.

Your eyes open and your wife is standing there, staring down at you. You react with your usual syllable: "Hey." Hard to know what to say.

"Chump," she says, like it's the end of a long thought.

"Hey," you say again.

"Let's just say I'm a bloody fucking chump," she says. "Who've you got hidden in here?" She wanders into the other room and back again. "I didn't know you had any neatness left in you," she says.

You raise yourself off the couch, peer into the kitchen, which is as neat as an operating room, a smell of pine disinfectant left behind by whatever kind soul has cleaned it during your spell of unconsciousness.

"You're looking at the world's number one," she says.

"Number one what?" you ask.

"Fill in the blank."

Turns out the trip to Montreal didn't work out so well, Fred's hands all over her from start to finish, the food ordinary—no French bistros for Fred—the hotel a fleabag, a psychological week spent coming back through customs, the car searched.

“Fred’s free, but it took a lot of talking,” Louise says.

“Sounds like you could use a night out,” you say, the way you used to. There’s the problem of the six-fifty in your pocket.

“What I need is sleep,” she says, an understatement, her eyes opening for the first time at two thirty the next day. You’ve just come back from the market.

“Someone’s been into my purse,” she says while she’s combing out her hair.

“Surprises don’t come cheap,” you say.

“The less said the better,” she says when you’re both on the couch, drinking the wine Louise has bought without her knowledge. It’s cold, dry and delicious, she tells you. You stick with the Schlitz.

“What are we having for dinner?” she asks.

“Surprise,” you say. “It’ll be ready when you get back.”

“Where am I going?”

“Wherever you want as long as you’re back at seven sharp.”

“I don’t get it,” she says.

“You will.”

Your timing is right this time. The napkins (two of them) are clean enough, folded tightly beneath the silver, the table set. The light from two candles helps hide the blemishes of male housekeeping.

“Sit,” you say, tucking in the chair like you used to.

“You treat me like a dog,” she says like she used to, and you bring in the meal on a tray. Nothing fancy, just straight New England fare.

“Ooh,” she says. “*Nice* presentation.” She pronounces it in quotes as she always does, making fun of high cuisine. “My favorite,” she says. She claps her hands together then goes to work on one of the claws.

“I just wanted to see if I still had the touch,” you say. Feeding her seafood was always what you did best.

END