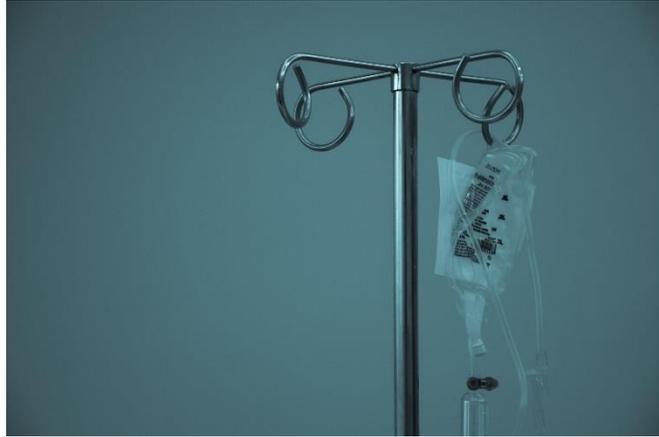


# Lobsters

by Elisabeth Dahl | February 13, 2020

Tom's barrel chest jerked up, then down at regular intervals, following the dictates of the hospital ventilator. Attached to the machine, he seemed all torso, his lower half an afterthought, like the straw-haired Resusci Annies that he'd haul around the high school gym during CPR units. That was long ago, when he was the coach and Helen was the music teacher and they were, improbably perhaps, in love.



Fluids skied down IV lines and into his arm. Bruises bloomed at the injection sites. Soft restraints held his wrists and sedatives stilled his eyelids, while medical tape secured the breathing tube to his face. Extroverted, garrulous Tom—Helen's ex-husband.

Just thinking about it—his sudden imprisonment—made Helen feel faint. She left the room. Shoulder blades pressed against the cold hallway wall, she inhaled for a count of three, held it for four, exhaled for five, just as she'd learned in relaxation class.

Around two o'clock that afternoon, Helen had been toweling off in front of the gym locker, pool water dripping from her salt and pepper pixie, when she spotted a voicemail she'd missed, left a couple of hours before. Tom had started having terrible abdominal pain during a faculty meeting, a woman's voice said. He'd just left by ambulance, headed for Las Vegas General. Helen had to think for a second—Tom who? She shook as she reached for her underwear, which was folded in half at the bottom of the locker. She put on her glasses.

Helen phoned her current husband, Gavin, as she drove east, white sunlight scorching through the sunroof. "Why didn't they call his fiancée?" Gavin asked. Helen had wondered that too, of course. While still in the locker room, she'd called the school number back. "You're the only emergency contact," the woman had said, rustling paper.

"I guess the errands can wait?" continued Gavin.

Gavin and Helen were flying to Costa Rica in three days to mark ten years of marriage. There were travelers' checks, bottles of sunblock, and other supplies to purchase—a whole list of items the ecotourism group recommended packing. They'd been planning to shop after her swim.

“Yeah,” said Helen, “we’ll take care of everything tomorrow.” She made her natural alto as soothing and even as possible. Though he loved the idea of travel, Gavin had a hard time actually leaving town. Securing a dogsitter, putting the mail on hold, remembering to pack the chargers—it all made him anxious.

By the time she’d passed through the hospital’s sliding glass doors, Tom was already in surgery. An appendectomy, the nurse explained. Helen exhaled. She’d had one herself, a few years back. Not a big deal, really. A useless appendage excised. Whoever needed to know the latest about Tom—his fiancée, the school—could wait a few more hours, until he was awake again. Hospital Jell-O spilling out of his mouth (he’d be starving, as he always was), he could provide names and phone numbers. Gavin might sometimes tease her about procrastinating, but this was one situation where waiting made sense.

Actually, she looked forward to a quiet few hours. With both of them having retired a year earlier (Helen at fifty-nine and Gavin at sixty-five)—well, there was such a thing as too much togetherness. Ever since she’d casually mentioned trying to lose weight before their trip, Gavin had been a watchdog at the refrigerator. He would never say it, but she had a feeling Gavin preferred how she’d looked when they met, twenty pounds ago. A landscape architect by training, he sometimes looked at Helen as if she were an overgrown boxwood—topiary gone awry.

When the surgeon entered the waiting room at six thirty, Helen was eating her second package of Lorna Doones and breathing as slowly as a yogi, watching a travel show host glide through a Moroccan market.

The surgery had gone well, the doctor said. But because of “post-op breathing irregularities,” they had moved Tom to the ICU and were keeping him intubated.

Helen’s hands started shaking again. After her own appendectomy, she’d been moved to a regular hospital room, so she hadn’t anticipated this. Now it seemed even more important that the fiancée be here. Maybe Tom could at least write down the fiancée’s name and number.

Helen gathered her things. Legs stiff from sitting, she followed the signs to intensive care.

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Helen had met Tom in 1992, when she took a job at a new Las Vegas middle school. She was thirty-five and single—the music teacher. He was thirty-seven and had been coaching and teaching PE since his days as a college football player. Sometimes they’d

exchange pleasantries in the gym as he cleaned up after a game and she arranged chairs for a music performance.

After a faculty party on the last day of school, he offered to carry some boxes to her car. He went first, his big form silhouetted against a desert sunset as deeply hued as the Planter's Punch she'd just downed. He was a Frank Gifford type, with wheat-colored hair and a lopsided smile.

When, moments later, he asked her out for a drink, she found herself short of breath. Did she even like him that way? She'd never really considered it. But this was the start of summer, a time to embrace grand schemes: composing a new piece for her chorus, studying Italian, and doing Jane Fonda's Workout daily. She'd always dated bookish sorts. Maybe it was time to try something new?

They packed the summer with trips to Santa Fe and southern Utah. They slept in tents and biked terrain she would previously have deemed impossibly hilly. She admired how, while she could be tentative, he careened forward into life, the way a downhill skier leans over the tips of his skis. When they went out for sushi on the Strip (she'd never even had it), he didn't just accept whatever appeared on the rotating belt. He chatted up the sushi chef, learned his kids' names, and asked him to make something from the freshest, best-looking fish that had come in that day. Tom leaned forward into Helen too. They had great, messy, head-in-the-clouds sex.

When school resumed, they kept their relationship quiet. It seemed simpler. And besides, they had fun treasuring the secret—sitting across a box of doughnuts in the faculty room, displaying nothing more than pleasant collegiality when in fact they'd been deep in bed not two hours earlier.

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A nurse updated the whiteboard, adding the squeak of a marker to the rest of the room's beeps and heaves and sighs. The clock said 7:33 p.m.

When Gavin's bearded face popped up on her cellphone, Helen texted back: *Will call in a few*. She didn't want to be on the phone while the nurse was in the room. And she had to locate this fiancée. Heavily sedated Tom was not going to be able to produce even one letter of this woman's name, she realized now.

Searching Tom's Patient's Belongings bag turned up a Velcro wallet, a locked cellphone, track pants, underwear, and a T-shirt. She couldn't find anything about the fiancée—not even a business card.

Tom didn't have siblings, his parents had died, and at a distance of thirteen years from their marriage, Helen no longer knew who his good friends were. Once, Helen's and Tom's lives had made a Venn diagram. Now their circles didn't overlap at all.

She called the school back, hoping someone could direct her to the fiancée, but it was late and the phones went straight to voicemail.

The respiratory therapist told Helen they hoped to remove the tube tomorrow morning, once they'd lifted the sedation and confirmed that Tom could breathe comfortably on his own.

The last time Helen had run into Tom was at a supermarket a year earlier. She'd recognized him from behind: the Panthers jacket on a six-foot-three-inch frame, the rounded shoulders, the crimp in the back of his hair. He still looked good. One hand resting casually on the fish counter, grayer than he'd been, Tom mentioned that he'd changed schools. Also, he was about to remarry—a yoga instructor based in Florida. He'd be moving to join her soon. As they stood under the fluorescent lights, Helen wondered if she and Tom would ever see each other again. She couldn't help but feel kinship with the lobsters in the tank a few feet away. Once, she and Tom had been married. Now they were little more than lobsters in tinted blue water, banded claws knocking together without intent.

The nurse raised a deflated IV bag off the pole and hung its bulging replacement. She lifted the side of the hospital gown and checked Tom's incision. An aide rolled in a recliner. He demonstrated how to kick the footrest out. Affixed to the headrest was a clear plastic cover, the kind you saw on chairs at casinos sometimes.

Helen was supposed to be at book group tonight. After, she'd planned to sort through her bathing suits, make sure she had at least two that looked okay. She hadn't, in fact, lost any weight.

Standing outside a bank of elevators, Helen phoned Gavin. He wanted to bring her a turkey sandwich, some carrots. "Better you stay with the dogs," she said. Gavin had never met Tom, and she didn't want Tom to wake up and find a stranger on the other side of the plastic tube—especially a stranger who believed Tom to be little more than a big lug with a whistle and a football playbook. One time, a little tipsy, Gavin had called Helen's marriage to Tom her "lost decade."

By the time Helen hung up, her mouth was as dry as shredded paper and her stomach hurt from hunger. She set off for the cafeteria, where she shoveled in as much food as she could before closing: a tuna sub, potato chips, and a huge wedge of carrot cake. She stowed an apple and a Snickers in her purse.

Back in the room, she arranged herself in the recliner and laid a blanket over her jeans. Helen and Tom hadn't spent the night under the same roof—much less in the same room—for thirteen years. She knew staff would be in and out of the room all night. Sleep would be light at best. She reached into her gym bag for mints. Inside the nylon chamber, her Speedo and swim towel were still damp.

Early tomorrow morning, whenever the school started answering phones, she'd try again to track down the fiancée. But—the thought suddenly hit her—what if Tom's engagement had ended?

Maybe he'd come to believe that he and the yoga instructor lacked what he and Helen had had, imperfect as it was. After all, Tom and the fiancée hadn't yet done things like set up a house together. She remembered Tom's unexpected attachment to throw pillows. A room wasn't complete without them, he said, plumping up the ones they'd already acquired. Who would have thought it, a football coach who loved throw pillows?

Helen laid her glasses atop her gym bag, then clasped Tom's hand. "I'm here, Tom." She squeezed. "It's Helen. They took out your appendix. I'm here. You're going to be fine." Grip steady on Tom's hand, she watched his closed eyelids, hoping for a twitch or other movement—some acknowledgment that the good news had sunk in.

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Almost a year to the day after their first kiss, in June 1994, Helen and Tom had eloped to the Elvis Chapel along with the tourists. And then, finally, they'd told the wider school. The vice-principal threw them a potluck. You could tell that the other faculty members found them an unlikely couple, and that made it all the more fun.

Helen was deeply involved in the Las Vegas Choral Arts Society, occasionally guest-hosted a classical music show on a local station, enjoyed her nieces, and didn't want or need kids of her own. Neither did Tom.

Their relationship sailed forth like a hot air balloon until, eventually, it began losing altitude. She started to find Tom unbearably loud, unable to edit himself. He claimed that she'd become withdrawn. Finally, after ten years of marriage, they decided to call it quits. She took a job at a different school. About three years later, she met and soon wed Gavin, who was exactly the kind of quiet, intellectual man everyone would have expected her to be with from the start. She and Gavin made sense. Having tried the alternative, she was willing to give sense another chance.

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Around 4 a.m., a woman presented at the entrance to the ICU room, first as a cascade of black hair, then an enormous satchel. She ran to Tom's side. "Oh God, baby are you all right?"

Helen peeled her face off the folded sweatshirt she'd been using as a pillow. She found her glasses on the gym bag.

The woman shook Helen's hand firmly. "I'm Janice, Tom's fiancée."

Janice perched on the bed and started stroking Tom's arm. She had to be in her late forties, Helen thought. On the inside of her narrow, elegant wrist, she had a tattoo of a yin and yang symbol.

Helen rubbed her hot cheek, feeling the creases the sweatshirt had left behind. "I tried to find a number for you," Helen said.

"One of the other coaches called me. I got the first flight out of Tampa."

Tom's ventilator heaved and chuffed. Helen wondered if he could hear them talking.

"What are the doctors saying?" Janice asked.

"He'll probably come off the ventilator tomorrow," Helen replied. "He should be fine. This was just a precaution."

Janice buried her face in Tom's neck. "We're gonna be fine, baby! Puerto Vallarta, here we come!"

She turned to Helen: "We're getting married in Mexico next month. The Colomba Resort. White sand beaches, hot stone massages, we can't wait." Janice rotated her neck a full 360 degrees, as if in anticipation.

Helen and Gavin's trip was part of an ecotourist package recommended by their local Sierra Club. Helen would rather have done a frivolous trip like Tom and Janice's, but Gavin felt that ecotourism was a more worthwhile investment of their time and money.

"Thank you for being here," Janice said.

"If you don't mind my asking," Helen said, "why am I Tom's emergency contact?"

Janice frowned, as if trying to remember. “We talked about it when the HR forms were due for renewal. I guess we figured it was okay. Your name was still there from before, and I lived so far away. Plus, he was moving soon.

“Before I saw the form,” Janice continued, “I’d never even known your name. He’d only ever called you ‘my ex.’” She shook her head, as if hearing what she’d just said. “I’m sorry, that probably sounds cold.”

Helen jerked as if poked by a needle. She gathered up her bags, then said goodbye to Janice. There wasn’t much point in saying goodbye to Tom.

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Helen left her gym bag in the trunk of her car and headed for the La Fontaine. She and Tom used to come here regularly on Saturday evenings. The place was all brass finishes and maroon upholstery—it probably hadn’t been updated since the eighties—but it had been theirs, the casino equivalent of a dive bar. The one time she’d suggested coming here with Gavin, he’d chortled and said there wasn’t enough hand sanitizer in the world.

Helen ate Macho Nachos, drank Heineken, and started playing through a bucket of quarters. The sounds and rhythms of the casino slowly began to override those of the ICU.

A wall-sized TV mounted just above the quarter slots was playing the Food Network. *The Barefoot Contessa*. Ina Garten laid a platter of roasted chicken and root vegetables on the table in front of her grinning husband, Jeffrey. Helen had seen the show enough to know that this was how Jeffrey always was—appreciative and adoring. They’d been married for decades.

Helen stifled a burp. She wasn’t drunk but she wasn’t exactly *not*-drunk either. Having played a hundred quarters already, her thoughts were a ribbon of cherries and 7s and plump, brown-bobbed Inas.

A woman about Helen’s age played slots two chairs down. Between pulls, she was also watching the TV.

“Did you ever have a guy love you that much?” the woman asked.

Helen shook her head. She’d been thinking the same thing.

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Around seven in the morning, Helen arrived home. Gavin was asleep, his CPAP sounding not unlike the hospital ventilator. She took a shower, relieved to wash the night away.

Over breakfast, sprinkling blueberries onto his oatmeal, Gavin asked how it had all turned out.

“Pretty well,” Helen replied. “The fiancée got word and came, eventually.”

“Did she explain the emergency contact thing?”

“No,” said Helen. “In fact, she’d been just as surprised as I was.” She poured coffee into a mug. “If you want to know the truth, she seemed quite hurt by it. Who could blame her?”

Gavin stirred the oatmeal, releasing steam. “Knowing Tom, it was probably just laziness, an old form that never got updated.”

The answer that formed in her head surprised even Helen herself. “But, Gavin, you don’t know Tom. You’ve never even met.”

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Four days later, she and Gavin were in an aerial tram suspended over a Costa Rican rainforest with six strangers, listening to a lecture about global warming. The trees stretched out below them, greenery in lace.

Soon, she and Gavin would have been married longer than she and Tom had. Ten years—it was the tipping point. If you made it to eleven, you were solid. At least as Helen imagined it.

Gavin started asking the guide questions. Question after question.

Helen tuned her ears to the living, breathing forest—the rush of water over rocks, the call of birds from tree to tree—and waited for the tram to start moving again.