

## CLETE AND JUANITA CELEBRATE THEIR ANNIVERSARY

As Clete and Juanita followed the maitre d' through the restaurant, Clete made fun of the little man's swishing, light-stepping gait, doing his own exaggerated version, drawing muted laughter from the other diners and muffled giggles from his wife.

Clete's foil must have figured out he was being made the butt of a childish joke, and he must have had some pull with the kitchen, because when the lobsters arrived at Clete and Juanita's table they were rather undercooked, to the point of being still alive, even frisky.

Juanita's reached out and crushed the stem of her wine glass in its claw. She screamed and pushed herself away from the table as the wine splattered her dress. Clete jumped up and leaned over with a nutcracker to rescue her and his dinner snatched him by the groin, getting a clawful of trouser, just missing the important stuff. He straightened up, terrified, thinking it had gotten the goodies and the pain just hadn't registered yet. He spun away from the table with his lobster still attached to his fly, its tail cutting the air like a rudder, making it rise and fall like a carnival ride.

Juanita sat frozen at the table, arms length away, as her dinner waved its long antennae at her and made its slow, relentless approach. Her little Chihuahua, Ginger, who she'd sneaked into the restaurant in her purse, woke up when Juanita screamed at the lobster falling off the table to the floor. The dog's knobby head popped out of the handbag and she came face-to-face with what certainly would have been the death of her if she didn't do something fast. So she did: she clawed her way up Juanita's body like a monkey to a perch on her shoulder, where she sat yapping and shivering and piddling, as the maitre d' led another couple through the dim light, smirking, making a mental note to come back to tell the lady that there were no dogs allowed in this establishment.

## BONDING: ELLIS AND ROY

It had been six weeks since the baby was born and Ruth decided it was time to get away from him for a night, to go out and see a movie. "You got it, Ellis," she told her husband as she checked her face in her compact mirror,

Ellis didn't answer; he was absorbed in his football game.

"Ellis, are you listening to me? ELLIS."

"Huh? What? I'm listening, God damn it," he said, turning reluctantly from the tube.

"O.K.," said Ruth, rummaging in her purse for her car keys. "I expressed some breast milk, it's in that plastic tropical punch jug in the refrigerator; the little guy'll be hungry when he wakes up. Give him twelve ounces, heat it for thirty-five seconds in the microwave, no more, no less; and he hasn't had a b.m. today, so keep a sharp eye out, hear? And remember to sterilize the nipples, twenty minutes in boiling water, it's very important; if he's cranky, sing to him, he seems to like Cole Porter; and make sure you get the diaper on real snug, otherwise they leak ...."

Ellis had slowly turned back toward his game while his wife instructed him, and gradually increased the T.V.'s volume with his remote control, until her voice was completely drowned out. She would've dragged him out of the chair by his ears, but the doorbell rang and saved him. It was their neighbor, Juanita.

"C'mon, Ruth, let's go. The movie starts at six."

Ruth looked concerned. "You think he'll be O.K. with the baby?" she said, nodding her head in her husband's direction.

"He'll do fine, Honey, don't worry," said Juanita.

The baby woke as the girls pulled out of the driveway and immediately started to scream. Ellis tried raising the T.V.'s volume even higher, but it didn't work. He could still hear the kid. He jumped up, put the bottle in the microwave, and grabbed the wailing baby from the crib.

"Oh shit," he said. It was a b.m. A big b.m., soaking through the sleeper like hot, stinking slough mud, alive with aroma. He stripped the kid and the crib and filled the washing machine. The baby continued to scream. Ellis washed him off under the running water in the tub and fought the damp, uncooperative little limbs into a fresh sleeper. Then he picked him up and ran to the microwave, carrying him under one arm, like a football. He opened the oven door: apparently he'd set it for the wrong time; the bottle had melted into a bubbling, transparent glob. He poured another from the jug and pried his previous attempt off the bottom of the microwave with a kitchen knife. He put the new one on, setting it for thirty-five seconds, like Ruth had said.

The doorbell rang. It was Clete, his next door neighbor, Juanita's husband: "What the hell are you doin' to the kid, for cryin' out loud? You can hear him all over the damned neighborhood."

Ellis pulled the bottle out and tested its temperature by squirting a dash of milk on the inside of his forearm. It was too cool. He put it on for another thirty-five seconds.

"I'm not doin' anything to him," he told his neighbor. "I'm just tryin' to get him fed and shut him the hell up."

Clete stuck his fingers in his ears, looked at the T.V., and said, "Who's winnin'?"

Ellis struggled with his squirming son and said, "Damned if I know, I haven't had a chance to watch."

"Huh?" said Clete, removing a finger from his ear.

"Fuck you, Clete," said Ellis.

The baby screamed harder. The microwave beeped. Clete said, "Damn, the kid's gonna keep that up, I'll go watch the game at home. It's startin' to get on my nerves."

Ellis punched Clete in the nose, knocking him down.

Clete stood up with his head tilted back, pinching his bleeding nostrils.

"I knowd whed I'b not welcob," he said, and walked out the door, leaving a trail of little red droplets on the shag rug.

The baby continued to howl. Ellis grabbed the bottle from the microwave and tested its temperature again. His flesh sizzled as the steaming milk hit it: "GOD DAMN IT TO HELL," he screamed, dropping the bottle and his son.

Angry blisters rose on the delicate skin. He picked the baby up and poured another bottle as b.m. number two soaked through the sleeper into his t-shirt, and the washing machine, under the influence of an overdose of liquid soap, erupted, spewing foamy white lava onto the garage floor.

Two hours passed. Baby Roy wouldn't shut up and he wouldn't take the bottle. Ellis laid him on the bed and

punched the wall to vent his frustrations, and then he punched the mattress an inch from the boy's face, sending him high into the air in a triple front somersault.

Ellis cried, "Oh my God," and shuffled back to catch his son, who was tumbling across the room like a poorly thrown forward pass. He scooped him up just before he hit the rug, pulling him up and clutching him to his chest. The boy was saucer-eyed and silent, until he figured out that he wasn't dead. Then he resumed his vocalizations, fueled now by fear instead of anger.

Ellis fixed another bottle and wrestled with his son in his recliner, his nerves as shot as they could be. The football game was long gone. It had been replaced by a mini-series about World War Two. Everybody was screwing everybody else. And the baby's screams had turned into a hoarse and desperate shout.

Finally, as Carson started in on his monologue, Baby Roy, too tired and hungry to be defiant anymore, took the nipple that his father had been stabbing at his face and finished the milk in one huge slurp. Then he let out a loud, somnolent burp, and fell asleep in his father's arms.

When Ruth and Juanita encountered blood on the porch, they feared the worst. Ruth said, "Oh my God," and put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes watered as her imagination worked. Juanita grabbed her arm and led her inside the house.

The only light was the eerie glow from the T.V.'s test pattern. Ruth whimpered like a puppy. Juanita hit the light, squinted around the room, and said, "Oh look, how cute."

Ellis was kicked back in his recliner, snoring and drooling out of the side of his mouth. Baby Roy, with just a touch of white spit-up on his cheek, was sleeping peacefully on his father's bare chest, clasping a handful of the salt-and-pepper chest fur tightly in his tiny fist.

LUAU

When Clete got home from work, Juanita was playing ukulele music on the stereo while she danced the hula in a shedding grass skirt. "What's up?" Clete asked.

"Luau," said Juanita, floating her fleshy arms one way and then the other. She hula-ed out to the kitchen and pulled