

Who Set Off the Liberal Detectors?

by Con Chapman

Thursday night, girls night in, as my wife's *uber*-hip dance crowd has assembled at our place to watch VHS tapes of the Boston Ballet from the 80's. I seem to recall that I could dance in the 80's, too--to something that sounded like "I, Sharona," with a paralegal named Sharon. It's all lost in the mists of time and gin and tonics.

Nice nippers.

I'm playing the Helpful Husband tonight, serving *hors d'oeuvres*, which is French for "out of work," which I'm definitely not. In fact, I'm probably the only person in the house who has to get up at 5:05 tomorrow morning to make the 5:55 train into Boston, but I'm not complaining. The little woman is entitled to the female equivalent of a poker night every now and then, so I'm bringing Trader Joe's appetizers and chardonnay to the assembled ladies of the dance.



World's Top Female Poker Players

"He's so well-trained!" exudes Mimi, the pianist for the Tuesday night, Monday and Saturday morning adult ballet classes my wife takes. I give her a withering smile; I *hate* being matronized. I know she's only joking, but it's so . . . pathetic. "Actually," I respond, trying (but not too hard) not to sound defensive as I cast an upraised eyebrow at my wife, "I'm the only one in the house who has any experience waiting tables. Did you know I once served *two* Nobel Prize winners at the same lunch?"

"Really?" asks Starr, a former chorus girl who's seen the light and moved slowly towards it while women in white leotards beckon-
-"*come to adult ballet, come to adult ballet.*" "What did they taste like?"



"They were diners, not the dined-upon. Milton Friedman and Saul Bellow at the Quadrangle Club at the University of Chicago," I say. "As a matter of fact, I'm not entirely sure there wasn't a third laureate there at the same time."

"Why the uncharacteristic vagueness?" says Lilith, the benefactress who has endowed the position of Ivana, who teaches the classes. She's a high-earning professional herself, and appreciates my punctiliousness about matters other slobs merely elide over.

"There was a table full of Asian physicists, scrawling on napkins," I said by way of explanation. "I could never tell one from the other."



Everybody check your physicist, somebody's got mine.

"Ooo--you're bad!" Mimi says, looking at me as if I'm a naughty boy she's going to keep after class to sort the notes into eighths and sixteenths.

I head back out to the kitchen with an armload of empty wine glass and plates, where I see Alix, the girl from the neighborhood who's helping out.

"Everything under control?" I ask.

"Pretty much," she says. "Can I pour the wine down the drain?"

"No, I'm afraid not," I say, shaking my head ruefully. "We're on septic, so if you throw out alcohol the leaching field gets drunk and wanders around the neighborhood singing rhythm 'n blues hits of the fifties."

"What should I do with it?"

"Give it to me--I'll finish it off," I say as I gulp down a naughty little *pinot noir* I happen to catch with its nose running and its legs in a *plie*.



She turns back to the dishes, making sure she crumbles up the soap suds so they don't clog the hyper-sensitive drain, when we hear a high, keening *scree-scree-scree* sound.

"Is the house on fire?" she asks.

"I don't think so," I say, master of my domain, so to speak. "I'm pretty sure it's the Ace Hardware Liberal Detectors I installed."



"How 'bout Libertarians--you got anything that will keep Ron Paul off my property?"

"We have Liberal Detectors, too," she says.

"They're absolutely *de rigueur* out here in the exurbs," I say with a heavy dollop of avuncular concern. "You never know when somebody from Greenpeace is going to come up your driveway looking for money to save the gay baby whales."



Looking for Judy Garland.

I cast off my dish towel and rush into the living room, where consternation abounds.

"Are you the fire marshall?" Starr asks.

"Yes, but I don't think that's the problem," I say as I look up at the cathedral ceilings. "I think one of you set off the Liberal Detectors."

The ladies look at me as if I'm daft. "But," Mimi says with an expression of genuine confusion on her face, "aren't we all liberals here tonight?"

Typical--just what you'd expect from a crowd from Boston where you can't measure Republican voters with an electron microscope, and a man was attacked by a crowd a few weeks ago for saying nice things about Ronald Reagan.



Working together--as equals.

"Afraid not," I say as I go to the back closet to get the 11-foot extendable light bulb changing arm. It's not as if I *wanted* to install Liberal Detectors, but I had to after we had a couple of close calls. We live in Massachusetts where Democrats outnumber Republicans four to 1. Fifty-one percent of the population says they're "independent," but by that they just mean either that they're ashamed of the Democratic Party, whose leaders have an uncanny knack for ending up in jail, or don't think the Republican Party is "hip" enough for the image they want to project. Can't imagine where they get that idea.



"So--is it a problem out here?" Lilith asks.

"Are you kidding?" I ask incredulously. "We had a woman over for dinner whose husband started playing bad white harmonica at the table!"

"Good Lord," Lilith says, genuinely horrified.

"I took him aside afterwards and told him--that sort of thing just wasn't done among our kind."

"I should hope not!" Mimi exclaimed--she plays classical music all week, and is a stickler for formality.

"Yer darn tootin'," I said. "If you're going to play harp in this house, you got to be bad, like Little Walter, Big Walter, Carey Bell, and other crazy-ass motherf---ers so's you can git da house *rockin'*."



Little Walter: Took the front doors off his car because it was cheaper than air conditioning.

"That's not so bad," Lilith says after clucking her tongue in a restrained little "tsk." Not a "tsk-tsk"--that would be too extravagant.

"Oh no? Well how about the guy who came over after a Crohns & Colitis benefit and started ragging about Republicans and bankers and so on? I almost cold-cocked the guy. Finally I just decided I'd tell him our bathroom wasn't working and he'd have to leave."

I extend the arm up as high as I can, grasped the plastic dish and unscrewed it. The screeching stopped.

"Did you buy 9 volt batteries like I asked you to?" I said to my wife.

"That's your job."



You must be THIS TALL to waterboard THIS TERRORIST.

"Then we're out. Looks like you ladies will have to be on your best behavior for the rest of the night," I say, and as I scan the room I can tell from the guilty looks on the faces I see that I'm amongst a crowd of incorrigible bleeding hearts. "Did one of you say something . . . uncalled for, or overbroad, or patently unfair about conservatives?"

Mimi is the first to 'fess up. "I . . . I made a joke about Dick Cheney's heart transplant."

"Mimi!" I say with a hurt tone. "I'm . . . disappointed in you."

"Because you care deeply for supply-side economics?"

"No--because I care deeply for quality humor. That is so . . . lame. Here I serve you nothing but the freshest quips, asides and one-liners I can think of, and you ride that trite Cheney-had-no-heart-to-begin-with meme. Don't you know he was the Democrats' favorite Republican until he was thrust into the crucible of the War Against Terror? That he . . ."

My wife takes me by the arm, right above the elbow, and squeezes *hard*. I stop talking to squeal like a stuck pig, which was her intended effect.

Starr begins her confession.

"Me too," Starr says in a voice rich with overtones of remorse. "I . . . I said all conservatives were stupid."

"Now, Starr," I say, trying to keep her from sliding into a blue funk. "You know I'm *way* smarter than you--right?"

"Well . . ."

"I mean--you're an adjunct professor who's never written anything in her life. You just . . . talk a lot, and copy and paste links and send them to your friends."

"That's . . . mainly true."

"And then you wonder why you can't get your dissertation done. You've got so much to give to the world."

"You think so?"

"Sure. It's all crap, but in academia, nobody can tell the difference."

"Thanks," she says, looking up at me with eyes full of hope.

My pride and joy.

I hear a "clunk" sound and realize that Lilith has tossed a plastic bottle into a wastecan.

"Lil-ith . . ." I say, the way one warns a toddler that a scolding is imminent.

"What?" She's not giving any quarter.

"Did you just *throw away* a recyclable item?"

"Well, sure. I mean, you don't expect me to save the world with every Perrier, do you?"

"Why not? I do."

"You do?" It's Ivana Takamirovanoretskisharapovnetski, the Russian *boll-ay* (Baryshnikov's pronunciation, not mine) instructor who holds a special visa because she brought valuable consonants to America's letter-starved middle schools.

"But . . . I thought all Republicans are mean and hate environment!" she says in her Boris-and-Natasha inflected English.

I give her a look she's never seen before, unless she's spent time inside a deli case between smoked turkey and roast beef; cold, calculating--sublimely indifferent.

"Ivana--how old are you, if I may be so bold as to ask."



"Twenty-nine," she says hesitantly. "And five halves."

I have to allow myself a little chuckle. "Sweetie--I've been recycling since *ten years before you were born!*"

There is an audible gasp from the crowd.

"No way!" Mimi says.

"Way, baby, way," I reply. "I've recycled my way across the country, from the South Side of Chicago, where I used to see Junior Wells so often we got sick of each other, to Brookline, Mass., where I'd drive by Larry Bird's house on the way to the recycling center, to Wellesley, Mass., the only town in America whose dump has been written up on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*."

"The Daily Diary of the American Dream?" It's Mimi again--I've got her on the hook, just have to reel her in.

"The same. You 'gals'--my guess is you don't recycle a tenth as much as we do, you with your hybrids and cute little mini-compacts. Am I right?"

I hear Lilith gulp. "It's really hard to recycle in the city."

"Stop making excuses," I say. "If you really want to save the world, you need to move out here where the urban sprawl is fresh and clear, and get a big, honking low-mileage SUV. *Then* you'll be able to recycle, big time."

They're quiet, and I sense that I may have won a few hearts and minds with my stirring peroration. "Can I get anybody a Republican Party beer koozie to take home?"

"No," Lilith says doubtfully. "But if you have one of those Trickle Down Works For Me! wine sleeves, I'd be interested."

