

The Anchorman

By William Littlejohn

They want me to choose between the Plaintiff and the Defendant, known in kid circles as Mom and Dad. Remember the kid who tried to divorce his parents in Georgia? He made history, the upside-down kind. As for me, I'm fighting the good fight. In other words, I'm losing. So far all I've done is make trouble for Miss Brat. And, of course, humongous trouble for me.

The Anchorman.

I think I'll take to the airwaves, plead my case to my millions of fans. But first we need a microphone ... good, here's one, hanging over the toilet right next to the sink. It only *looks* like a hair dryer. Testing, testing. Now we're ready. So stand back. Hold on to your hats. We're on the air!

"Good morning, folks. This is your Hour of Power. We are broadcasting from the throne room of unit 22C atop the beautiful Bonita Shores Condominiums where the Plaintiff, Miss Brat, and your hero have, until yesterday, lived undercover for more than seven and a half months. Speaking of undercover, you will pardon my shadowy whisper ...

"Shhhh. Quiet. On the other side of this john door, a sexy six-year-old desperado with nosy ears lies in wait. On this side, your hero is taking care of business. Don't ask. Let's just say I'm busy. Let's say I'm reading. I'm reading something the PLAINTIFF tried to hide from me. (*Fat chance!*) The DEFENDANT's brief.

"I quote: us kid fugitives 'CANNOT LIVE BY PEANUT BUTTER AND CORN FLAKES ALONE, THE PLAINTIFF'S DENIAL NOTWITHSTANDING' (wow ... *notwithstanding!*) and 'PLAINTIFF WRONGFULLY SPIRITED THE CHILDREN OUT OF THE COURT'S JURISDICTION.' (What's *wrongfully spirited?*)

“Too bad that us fugitives are now captured, caught, and collared. ‘Cause yesterday the jig was up.

“So, why are we whispering?!!

“OKAY FOLKS, HEAR THIS!!!

“WATCH! for this heartrending tale, soon to be a 25-hankie movie on HBO—

“THRILL! to the family’s desperate flight from Providence and their search for shelter in one luxurious high-rise after another along beautiful beaches under a warm, bright Florida sun—

“CHUCKLE! as the family buys last year’s swimsuits and dinosaur tees—

“FOLLOW! the family as they buy a TV, search for an SPF 45 sunscreen for Miss Brat, and battle to exterminate an army of silverfish—

“MARVEL! as they tan, Miss Brat grows two inches, and your hero makes a senior-citizen friend—

“CRY! (often) with the Plaintiff—

“SOB! when the TV is repossessed right before the Jeopardy finals—and

“HISS! as the family is captured by law enforcement goons—”

“I have to get in there!”

It’s Miss Brat. Her rude knocks tell me she is determined.

“Hold your water. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“I *can’t* wait.”

“In a minute.”

“No. I’ll tell Mom.”

“Alright, alright,” I say, opening the door. “It’s all yours.”

“Eek! You didn’t flush.”

“I’m saving it.”

“You’re disgusting”

“My fans treasure my turds,” I yell as she slams the door. “I’m saving that one for Osama Bin Laden. The Tomahawk warhead will be filled with one-thousand pounds of shit. You better not flush that treasure out to sea. My country needs it.”

* * *

When the kid comes out of the bathroom, she doesn’t feel like going with me to the beach. She goes right to our room and curls up with Mr. Frog, the only animal I have left out for her when I packed for the trip back to Providence. Before we leave, I had wanted to shell down to the Stuart Inlet in hopes of finding at least one good alphabet cone. And then maybe dash over to the Ocean Drive Taco Bell. It has, amazingly, the best frozen spumoni custard in Florida.

In the last seven months, I have become addicted to spumoni custard. The Plaintiff says the custard is making me fat. She says the shell-seeking is just an excuse to buy a spumoni at the Taco Bell every day. Maybe that’s true. But the Plaintiff is also worried that looking for shells can turn you into a fairy. The Plaintiff is big on the differences between the sexes. And what goes where. We’ve had two sex talks since moving to Florida. The second one was a blast. It was after we went to see a Madonna movie where Madonna showed off her titties.

I’ve given it serious thought. Being a 10-year old shell-seeker does not make you a queer. It just makes you a 10-year old shell-seeker. Besides, with the Plaintiff working and me having to look after the kid during the day what else am I supposed to do? I like looking for shells. I already have a junonia, a lacey murex, and nine sharkeyes. I haven’t met anyone on the beach yet who has both a junonia and a lacey murex, so it isn’t like I was just fooling around out there.

At first, I definitely did not like *not* going to school. But it didn’t take long before I began to feel at home. And there are things here which snooty Providence only reads about in books. The

people I've met have been nice, a little loopy, but always friendly. It doesn't matter as much here if you're odd, or different, or even if you are a kid. Everybody in Florida is either too old or too young. Maybe that's it. It's the way you look at things, which is affected by how much time there is left.

The Defendant's brief says that's exactly why he should have custody of Miss Brat and me. We are turning into lazy good-for-nothings. He says the Plaintiff has sorely neglected our education; she has "wrongfully (this is another quote) deprived the Defendant of his rights of visitation and the company of his children."

While technically true, that sounds worse than it really is. For seven months, there has been nothing to stop Miss Brat or me from picking up the phone and calling the Defendant at any time. Somebody might say that proves something, that Miss Brat and me don't like our dad. If they did say that I would have to *object*. My dad is really a good guy. It's just that neither one of us (the kid is a dialing demon) wants to be the cause of any more trouble between the Plaintiff and the Defendant. So we don't call. So our *not* calling doesn't prove a darn thing.

Objection sustained!

* * *

On the plane, I sit between the Plaintiff and Miss Brat. The kid always gets the window seat and the Plaintiff likes a clear path to the toilet. And sure enough, we haven't been sitting down more than a minute before the Plaintiff is battling back toward the john at the front against a horde of passengers. They all act like the plane will leave before they can jam their bags and things into the overhead compartments and sit down. The Plaintiff's new spring jacket, carefully folded and arranged in the compartment over our heads, doesn't have a chance. It is destroyed. That gets me and the Plaintiff off to a bad start because she seems to think I should have done something to save it. Her being mad doesn't last long, though.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, honey,” she says.

“Your apology is accepted, noted, and filed away for future use, Scarlet.”

“You’re not mad, then?”

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

She giggles.

“Who is that supposed to be?” she says.

“You don’t know?!”

“No, tell me.”

“What a dumb broad.”

She smiles.

That’s one of the nicer things about the Plaintiff. She never gets mad when I say things like that. I try out a lot of my stuff on her. I think of her as Riverside, California or New Haven. You know, tryout city. The kid is Broadway, though.

The Plaintiff, fluffing the pink jacket, brushing away imaginary lint, says, “I hope I have time to touch it up,” then adds, “before the hearing.”

This is said in a solemn way, as solemn as the Plaintiff can say anything. The Plaintiff is not solemn or subtle. She is as subtle as a Benny Hill rerun. But the judge has ordered both the Plaintiff and Defendant not “to influence or try to persuade the child of the Parties” to say which one of them we want to live with. (I speak for Miss Brat, too, since P and D, to their credit, have agreed we’re a package deal.) So, that’s it. All I have to do is march up the stairs of the courthouse at two o’clock this afternoon and whisper into Judge Mario Antonelli’s ear the name of the lucky litigant.

The Plaintiff goes on fussing with the jacket although it seems to me to have sprung back pretty good. When she’s done all she can with the jacket, she then spends the next 40 minutes or so

working on the rest of her. She pats and smooths hair bleached by the sun and Mr. La Layne of Snip and Curl at the Buy Bonita Mall, checks and reapplies her lipstick, and after each operation examines how she's doing in a tiny compact mirror. The Plaintiff never tires of looking at herself. Neither do I.

I'm proud of the way she looks. She could be an older sister. Really. While her eyes are a little crinkly at the corners where a series of fine lines have formed, her skin glows. She has the coloring of a Naples sunset on a cloudy evening. It's a deep rosy color. It, the color, blends into a warm brown at the back by the ears. She has good, firm arms. And, in my opinion, as fine a set of legs as any woman in Florida. She knows it, too. She always wears the shortest skirts fashion allows. She never does anything, like put on her lipstick or comb her hair or file her nails without also doing something with her skirt. It's do the lipstick, then tug at the skirt; comb the hair, then smooth the butt.

"Are you nervous about having to go to court?" she suddenly asks.

Her question catches me by surprise, throws me off stride.

"You could get the chair for this, Ma."

"Are you?"

I shrug. "No. All in a day's work."

There is, for her, a long pause. I imagine I can feel both our hearts pounding.

"Have you decided yet?"

"Decided what?"

The Plaintiff gives me a long look, then sighs. The kid enters the picture then, using some excuse to climb over my legs toward the aisle, kicking them accidentally-on-purpose, which makes me suspect she's been listening all along. I grab her and tickle her crotch.

"You pervert," she squeals. "Mom, make him stop."

The Plaintiff stands shakily on high heels, smooths her skirt over her butt, then leads the kid by the hand to the john at the rear.

After they come back, a man in the row ahead stops in the aisle to speak to the Plaintiff. He leans over to observe how healthy her children look. It must be the genes, he says.

Gaand! She likes it because she pulls nervously at her skirt the way she always does when some man is getting ready to make an ass of himself. She doesn't do or say anything else. Still, he *knows* she liked his stupid remark. It is downright disgusting. Here is a woman with kids travelling from point A to point B. At either point A or point B, the father of the children is probably waiting or going home after putting his family on the plane. This guy pretends to be interested in us kids, asks where we're from, where we're going, all the while slipping in dumb compliments about the Plaintiff's tan or, like now, looking every five seconds at Plaintiff's legs.

I try. I interrupt him with a zinger or two. "How many kids do *you* have at home, sir?" and when he ignores that, I pretend to throw up in the barf bag. But I guess she knows me about as good as I know her. Because she moves to the row ahead and sits down with the guy! This is a little brazen, even for the Plaintiff. Really, I do not know what to think. My only consolation is that I don't have to watch any more. I've done everything I can. With that thought, I lie down across the two seats and sleep the rest of the way to Boston.

* * *

"Have you decided yet?" the Defendant's mother asks me. I am staying with Grandmother Defendant. Miss Brat is staying with Grandmother Plaintiff. It is an arrangement made in hell. Grandmother Defendant has not let up since I got there.

"Have you thought what it would do to your father not to have you kids?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

“I’ve thought what it would do to the Defendant.”

“Defendant? Defendant? You call the man who puts the food in your mouth, ‘Defendant’? What kind of a son are you, anyway?”

“A defendant’s son.”

“She should be the defendant.”

Grandmother Defendant is about to trash the Plaintiff.

“I haven’t decided,” I say, which is true even though I say it now just to head her off.

“You got to decide.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“You *got* to decide to go live with your poor papa ... how could you not?”

With that, the old lady, Italian, about 70, bursts into tears. I sit watching her cry. There is nothing I can say. And anything I could say wouldn’t be enough anyway.

The Defendant, my father, is an actuary, one of those people who works for insurance companies who figures out how long people live. He’s explained to me exactly what he does, and it’s more complicated than that. The proof of that is that the Defendant makes much more money than any of my friends’ fathers. The Defendant is also a mathematical genius. While I didn’t get that math gene, I know enough to know just how smart the Defendant must be.

But in many ways he’s the dumbest man alive. Here’s a man with all this money and a wife with the most beautiful legs in Florida, and all he does is work. That’s dumb.

The Defendant works all the time. He is a workaholic’s workaholic. We have a farm just inland from Providence. It’s fairly small, only 46-and-a-half acres and mostly pasture at that. But we have chickens, a cow, and two goats, one of which has to be milked just like a cow. Every night, he works in the barn. He is always up in the morning before anybody in the family, doing the chores, milking the cow and the goat, feeding the chickens, using the tractor, all before going to his

office. Even when there is no work, the Defendant works. He has never taken a vacation. Once, when the four of us drove up to Montreal two summers ago, he flew back the moment we arrived to take care of the chickens and the cow and the goats.

And now the Defendant's mother (is she reading my mind?) says, "Your poor papa has worked so hard. I'm so worried about him. This is the way you would pay back a man who has worked so hard to make things better for his family?"

"Grandma?"

"What? What?"

"Did you know I found two, not one, but two lacey murex shells?"

"Huh?"

"In Florida. And a junonia."

She stares, a puzzled look on her face.

Then she says, "You are sick. I could see it the minute you walked in the door. And to think I asked for you instead of your sister."

* * *

"Good afternoon, all you adoring fans. This is The Anchorman, Channel 11's courthouse reporter, reporting live from the steps of The Law Center here in Providence where the famous 'Brady Bunch' child-custody case is about to be thrashed out before Judge Mario Antonelli of the Superior Court. You are witnessing a historic first, the first time a radio talk show host has ever covered his own parents' custody battle—"

"Here you are," the kid interrupts.

"Here you are," she says again, as only an exasperated six-year-old can say it. "We've been looking for you all over.

"You gotta come in now."

The kid, I see, has also not escaped victimhood.

Her cheeks are unnaturally flushed and there is a hint of red on her lips. What's more, Grandmother Plaintiff has dressed her (I packed only jeans) for the litigation wars in one of the Plaintiff's old candy-striped dresses. It is not only much too big for her but hangs unevenly to just above her sneakers. It has been gathered and safety pinned just back of the neck to keep it from falling off. Then Grandmother Plaintiff camouflaged that mess with one of the plaintiff's old cardigan sweaters. The pinning has scooped out the front of the dress. It billows out from the rail thinness of her body like a spinnaker. The kid could now pass for a starving, flat-chested London tart.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is our lucky day. We have with us a famous six-year-old singer of dirty songs, La Chanteuse Fil-thee. Miss Fil-thee sings songs of love. She will now sing 'I Saw Mother Balling Santa Claus', but only if we beg her and only if we throw money into her heaving bosom."

"You are a fool."

"You really think so?"

"I know what you're gonna do."

"Yeah? What am I gonna do?"

"You're gonna decide."

"Decide what?"

"I don't know. Grandmama said you are, though."

The kid thinks a couple of moments, then says, "I'm too little to decide."

She waits until she thinks I'm ready. Then she gives my sleeve a tug. I follow her into the courthouse.