

Lobster Dining

[This is a letter I sent to my sister Connie on April 18, 1996. –S.H.]

Dear Con,

This is a (typically!) belated response to your letter of last month in which you enclosed the two Dave Barry columns. I find his humor only mildly amusing; kinda lame actually. My tastes run more to Mark Twain. (Do you recall Twain's recollection of his visit to a museum in Havana where they had not one, but *two* skulls of Christopher Columbus? One as a child, and the other as a man...)

The one Dave Barry column, about lobsters as big insects, and the other, about his medical fears, did however remind me of a recent embarrassing episode. Sara and I went to a local seafood restaurant, "Uncle Glubchuck's Fine Eating Establishment," whose motto is "Dine until you say Uncle!" While waiting to be seated we studied the live lobsters swimming in a tank. You may have seen the creatures in this situation: they usually have heavy rubber bands around their claws to keep them from attacking each other. Evidently while waiting on death row they tend to go mad and pluck each other's eyes out or something.

Anyway, despite this depressing scene, we both ordered lobster. However the prelude of empathetic concern for the poor lobsters reminded me of the usual cruel method of cooking them: fiendishly dangling them live over boiling water until they scream for mercy, and then heartlessly pushing them off the plank. Since I couldn't bear to be an accomplice to such a hideous crime as boiling a creature alive, I firmly instructed the waiter *not* to do this to *my* lobster.

After a while the waiter brought Sara's lobster and placed it in front of her. It looked and smelled so good. And then, looking at me rather strangely I thought, the waiter placed my lobster plate in front of me and hastily departed. The first thing I noticed was that my lobster looked different than Sara's. The color was more natural, like those swimming in the tank. "He must have died contentedly," I surmised. But then I thought I noticed a slight movement...

"You don't suppose this guy's still *alive!*?" I asked Sara. I looked up to see her in a feeding frenzy, melted butter dripping from her chin as she devoured her tasty victim. "Don't be silly!" she managed to reply between bites. And then speaking with her mouth full (tsk! tsk!), she chortled, "If it's still alive, at least they took the rubber bands off!"

I have found, however, that it does not pay to pop things into your mouth without a careful investigation of them. (There was this incident involving an apple with *half* a worm in it when I was 7 years old... But I digress.) So I delicately prodded the lobster with my fork. I stared in semi-disbelief as it skittered across my plate, climbing up on top the pile of French fries.

“Did you *see that?!*” I asked Sara. “See what?” she asked, reluctantly interrupting her buttery feast.

“This thing *is alive!* And it just crawled up on top my French fries!”

“Oh you dummy!” she said, evincing a luke-warm sympathy. “Stop being such a clown and eat your lobster.”

“No kidding!” I shouted, in a hushed kind of way. “Would I joke about a thing like this?!”

“*You* might!” Sara replied, and I had to admit (to myself) that she was right, I might... (Don’t you just hate it when somebody accuses you of doing something you didn’t do, just because it is the sort of thing you do all the time?)

“Look, you try nudging it with *your* fork if you don’t believe me!” I said with the righteous wrath of one who has been terribly wronged.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Sara muttered, but did reach over and push my lobster down off my French fries. It didn’t flinch. “Now are you happy?” she asked with annoyance.

I stared down at the lobster speechlessly. I was starting to believe I had imagined the whole thing. I prodded it again myself. Nothing. Sara went back to her eating. I peeked down at my plate more closely. Suddenly the malcontented creature lashed out and grabbed onto my necktie with its claw.

In a deeply calm and consciously steady voice I said to Sara “Now do you believe me?” and pointed at the beast hanging from my necktie.

“Will you stop that crazy stuff,” she hissed. “Somebody will see you! Why do you always have to pull such idiotic stunts just when we’re having such a nice evening!”

I could tell she was not pleased. I was not pleased either, what with the lobster hanging around my neck. There was only one thing to do. I took a big swig of my beer.

Now, as you may well imagine, all this had attracted a certain amount of attention from the other diners, a few scowls and a few titters. I found the whole situation not only a little on the bizarre side, but also, ... I don’t know ... more than a little embarrassing. In the better restaurants one is not supposed to allow lobsters to grab onto your necktie and hang from your neck. I felt like I had violated an unwritten law. (Or perhaps a written one; the federal legal code is getting so big I don’t think anyone is quite sure what exactly is in there any more.)

At this point the manager of the restaurant showed up at our table and demanded, “Just what do you think you are doing with that lobster?”

Somewhat nonplused, I replied: “It would be more correct to ask the lobster just what it thinks it is doing with me.” But this reply did not fully satisfy the guy.

Sara apparently decided that her presence was no longer required, and began edging toward the back door, pretending that she did not know me.

“I think there has been a failure to communicate here,” I said to the manager. “When I asked that my lobster not be boiled alive, I still expected it to be cooked.”

“Well, if that’s what you wanted you should have said so,” the manager replied. “How did you expect us to kill it if not by dropping it in the boiling water?”

“Oh, I don’t know... I guess I thought you could give it a painless injection or something,” I ventured.

Before this enlightening philosophical discussion could go any further, I peeked down at the lobster to see how it was doing. And in that instant *it happened*. The big event, I mean. (I should mention again that it was *both* of Dave Barry’s columns that reminded me of all this—not only the lobster column but also the medical fears column.)

There is something you should recall about lobsters—like the skulls of Christopher Columbus, they have not just one claw, but two. And when I peeked down at the creature clinging to my necktie with its left claw, it seized the opportunity to advance itself by latching onto my nose with its right claw. I immediately realized that things had gone from bad to worse. My blood-curdling scream so startled the people around me that several of the diners dove under their tables.

I grabbed the thing but didn’t dare jerk it loose. I reasoned that while I truly wanted to be rid of the lobster, I did not want to be rid of my nose. After a couple minutes of this tearful impasse, someone suggested that I lean over the pot of boiling water in the kitchen and dip the lobster into it, which would make it release its hold. Although this still seemed cruel to the lobster, I now considered that the lobster was being a little cruel to me too, and deserved whatever it got. But in a somewhat nasal tone, under the circumstances, I asked the dude whether he had ever tried this dipping thing himself, and he admitted that he had not. I said, as best I could, that I didn’t want to try it because the lobster might just tighten its death grip.

So I ask you, what would *you* do in this situation? It is good to think through these things in advance, because when they suddenly happen, you have sort of a hard time pondering over it dispassionately.

Fortunately, someone had the presence of mind to call 9-1-1, and an ambulance soon arrived which took Sara, me—and the lobster—to the emergency room. There the doctor sprayed some kind of anesthetic on the thing and it drifted off into a peaceful sleep and let go of my very raw nose.

“So I was right after all,” I said to Sara. Lobsters should be anesthetized before being dropped into the boiling water. That would be much more humane.

But I thought I still detected a bit of annoyance on Sara's face. Perhaps she shared my feeling that the whole evening had not gone all that well.

Your stupid brother,

Scott

P.S. None of the above is true. I never even wear neckties! (And now you know why!)