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Kiddie Cocktails

BY JULIA SANTUCCI

"Miss, oh Miss—where's the hostess, where is Edna?" The waitress rearranged her nylon apron and stepped from the silverware stand, only to dodge back, as the large woman spread her fleshy arms and swooped down the expanse of gray and white tiles. As she pushed between the round yellow tables, the hind foot of her silver mink trailed lightly behind her, knocking a napkin over here, and pulling a fork askew there. Approaching the hostess with a feline smoothness, she took an extra supply of air into her cheeks, and pounced. "EDNA!"

Edna, with a dozen menus under her arm, turned from checking through the paper-bound engagement book.

"Oh yes, Miz' Levy—the arrangements for your party are all right—did you notice the lovely spot we gave you, and don't the flowers look nice? The girls are polishing the glasses now, gave you some lovely girls, real nice—sure to be a fine party—my, you look good tonight—new hairdo?" Edna had placed her arm on the woman's shoulder and the furs were not rising and falling so fast anymore. It was professional etiquette not to interrupt, though such control defied most laws of human endurance. But suddenly the mink leaped into the air, as Mrs. Levy broke Edna's grip.

"Edna, what a stupid thing to do. Why did you put my table next to Sadie's? I will not allow it! Please have it removed at once—over there, down here, somewhere! Whose table is this?" She flung her bracelets toward the door. "Why can't I be here? Edna, you know Sadie makes my parties look cheap." She was pouting now. "And I just won't take it anymore. Besides, I'm very disappointed in my flowers. You'd think, for the money . . . oh, well, you can't get anything done right these days."

Edna murmured caressingly during the whole speech. "Yes,

Miz' Levy, certainly Miz' Levy, I understand, ma'am—we'll see what we can do. Now you just go keep Mr. Levy company—I'll take care of everything."

The last bit of orange sun was coming over the golf course through the glass of the dining-room walls. A piece of crystal on the table captured a rainbow of the deepest shades which played from rim to rim. The mink's toenail shattered the glass as Mrs. Levy swung in preparation for a haughty exit. The sun lay in tiny pieces all over the linen cloth.

"Oops," said Mrs. Levy, looking down. "So sorry, Edna." And she swept off towards the bar. "Oh, I forgot." She turned back. "Ed is bringing his son to show off, so have a high chair fixed."

Edna slammed the menus on the table.

"Now, for the luvuvpete, wouldn't you think she'd show a little appreciation." Glancing down at the broken glass, she yelled in a high trilled voice, "Oh, Tony, Tony deah. Come ovah and clean this up like a good boy."

Tony, in his faded blue working suit, came silently from a doorway. He was nearing his sixty-fifth birthday, but he swore he'd never retire. His moustache rose thickly from his upper lip, and his pinkish face was always stamped with a smile of greeting, even when he was saying good-bye.

"Edna?" His voice rose an octave in the one word. "Are you wanting old Tony? Ees a light burning out? Here, I got you a brand new one." He unsheathed a large bulb from its cardboard cover. "Ja, ja, here we are—now tell me, where ees thees light, plees?"

"No, no Tony. All the lights are fine. You just fixed them again this morning. No Tony, just collect this broken glass."

"Ah, yes, yes, such a shame." The big eyes became dark with tragedy, as he gently laid the light bulb on the chair. His hands spread out above the table in a gesture of comprehension. "I will clean, Edna. Such careless people."

Edna retrieved her menus and clicked up to the opposite corner of the room. Her hair, plastered with wave set, stayed stiff in spite of her gait.

"Miz' Levy's table's got to be moved. Sorry. How about down there?"

A couple of bus boys dragged the massive furniture away, and several waitresses pulled chairs in the same direction.

"Now, let's see about Sadie. Musha, deah, come heah." Marcia,

hardly the "Miss" that Mrs. Levy had taken her for, lumbered over to Edna. A hefty woman of some 180 pounds, she walked like a wound-up penguin. Now she took a Napoleon-like stance as her deep voice rose to satisfy the hostess.

"Yes, Edna," she said in a humble tone that was dramatically at odds with her position.

"Is everything all right for the pahty, now—silver checked, glasses polished, chairs straight, napkins folded? Sadie will be right in. Now, look here." Edna grabbed at a piece of felt that protruded from under the table cloth. "What's this dangling for, Mr. Baxon's diaper? Musha, now fix it up. Anna, come help her." The appointed waitress came magnetically. "Oh, gracious, here comes Sadie. For heaven's sake, hurry!"

Tony touched Edna's arm, pointing to the light directly above Sadie's table. "Shall I change, huh?" He noted her look of impatience, and his smile reached another half inch toward his right ear. "Ja, ja, I know is not burned yet, but maybe do that before party's over. Everything nice for party, eh?" He patted the yellow tablecloth tenderly.

"No, Tony. The light's all right. Go." With her left hand she pushed him back, and with her right she almost curtsied before Sadie. Marcia's foot was in the way, and Edna tripped instead. She caught her balance against the table and laughed. But her eyes cursed clumsy Marcia, as she sang:

"Sadie, good evening. Isn't it a perfect Saturday night? Now we have everything all fixed up for you. Miz' Levy will be down at the other end of the room—do hope you don't mind. She won't bother you. Musha will be your waitress. Musha, come take Sadie's bags. Aren't the flowers lovely, my deah? Yes, they go so well with the yellow cloth."

Sadie handed her armful of packages to Marcia, and placed her fingers on Edna's shoulders.

"Edna, darling, it's just lovely. The flowers are a little high, though, dear, don't you think. And why did he give me pink candles? You do have some more, don't you? Thank God. Mahsha, darling, fix the chocolates like a good girl, three plates should be enough for only ten people."

Sadie had rearranged the dining room. Edna was clicking to the store room for candles, Marcia was sampling a chocolate, and Sadie herself was reaching thin bare arms into a grass-woven shopping bag.

Her white chiffon dress hid her slimness, and swung from gather to gather, while her casual hairdo told a simple tale of current taste. If one did not look critically, the face was young. But Sadie's eyes were beginning to sink backwards, pulling the inelastic skin with them, and leaving sharp cheekbones to prove their years. As she moved from one side of the table to the other, she held her elbows bent in preparation for some imaginative activity—for Sadie never really touched things.

She glanced at the placecards in her hand. Small, white-sheen rectangles, they had her initials embossed in silver—S.I.B. The figures were almost intertwined to obscurity, but the "S" separated itself sufficiently to give a leading clue to the other figures. Beneath this grand seal, rather incongruously, were names of the guests in tiny blue ink script. This was Sadie's own touch.

Now she gracefully jerked herself from place to place, distributing these tiny symbols of herself appropriately, informing each guest of his position in relation to her. Man, woman, man, woman, man, woman—impeccably correct, impeccably memorized. Mrs. Crown must not sit next to Dirk Walters. They always argued about his nephew's school, which was Princeton. Marian Lipsey must not be anywhere Duke Sacter, for she always challenged his engagement to the Calhoun child. So Sadie went, sifting old quarrels, establishing new ones, and pretending oblivion to both.

"Mahsha, dahling, come here sweet. There's a water spot on that fork, and we wouldn't want that, would we? Now, we have the candy, and the nuts—oh yes, sweetheart, do be a dahling and bring me some cigarettes."

"Yas'm," growled Marcia. "What kind, ma'am? Everything?"

"Three packs of filters, and three of the regular, deah. But none of those fancy French things. They are vile."

Marcia lumbered off on her errand, twirling her side-towel around her left wrist. Sadie beat out the rhythm to a tune on her lips. The enamel nails of her fingers looked like a skillful butcher had dropped the meat cleaver across the ends of those long, knuckled fingers. Indeed, Sadie's face bore some hint of such a tragedy. At least with her mouth covered thus.

"Aren't these better, deah?" Edna rushed up with a pair of bilious yellow candles, dropped her menus, and twisted the new decorations into their silver sockets.

But Sadie was rushing to the door, to greet a grey-suited figure.

The eyes of everyone in the room turned. Only Tony remained gazing at the chandelier.

"T.J., T.J. Please come dahling. The table is over here, flowers terrible, so disappointed, oh sweetheart, please come help itty bitty me." Her whining soprano echoed as if the large room were empty. No one moved, until the silence became so obvious that all strove to remedy it, and spontaneously resumed their preparation with an ungodly clatter.

T.J. was Sadie's husband. His name was Thaddeus Jensen Baxon, and Sadie had alienated his mother by desecrating the regal tone. But blazoned out before the largest law establishment in the city was the ultimate victory of motherhood: a sedately lettered sign bearing the weight of Dirkson Walters and Thaddeus Jensen Baxon, Attorneys at Law.

There were two remarkable things about T.J. One was his massive frame, and the other was his knobby nose. In fact, the latter must have been highly desirable to nature, for the rest of his face seemed to be drawn to this blotchy center. His thick mouth obviously was a detriment to facile breathing, for a regular wheeze was most audible. And his eyes, in their eagerness to cuddle up to the spread nostrils, quite outdid each other, and might in some eternity be promised the glory of the Cyclops. T.J. was an established personage, and succeeded with his cases. Sadie succeeded with his money.

Staring down at his fluttering wife, he grunted, and enveloped her arm with his puffy fingers. She stepped to block his path, placed her hands caressingly on his cheeks and gave him a very thorough, very wet kiss.

"Oh, dahling, I do love you so much," she trilled.

T.J. grunted.

"Oh, for God's sake. Give her a mattress to make her happy," muttered Marcia.

"Hmph," breathed Tony, standing by with a vacant stare. Edna hissed, "Musha, shut up."

"Yas'm," and Marcia stole another chocolate. "Can I see a . . ." Her full mouth overcame her. "Can I see a menu."

Edna took one off the pile.

"Now be sure you remember we have cottage-fried potatoes."

"Yas'm," said Marcia, forgetting it. She pushed past Tony to the kitchen. Tips would run high tonight.

II

Mrs. Levy's guests, destined to the far end of the dining room, entered from right behind Sadie's table, and lingered to gaze and slap backs. Mrs. Levy, watching the ice around the crabmeat appetizer trickle to form puddles of colored water, cursed the fate which had allowed the two parties to occur simultaneously. Her open mouth carried it off well. Her closed fists did not. In a passion to excel, she ordered two bottles of imported champagne. She was damned if her guests would be underprivileged.

"Isn't it unfortunate about Sadie's flowers," she purred to the man beside her, forgetting the state of her own.

Sadie reigned. At the point where her flower arrangement reached undue height, the circle parted, Dirk Walters and Marian Lipsey being obliged to lean sideways in their chairs.

"Oh, yes, she is such a darling girl. Dresses marvelously. Dating your nephew, Dirk? How interesting. He is a junior at Princeton. Have another drink, Miz Lipsey. Mahcia, Mahcia, deah, another round of drinks." Sadie turned to her company. "The steak is marvelous here—I do recommend it. Hasn't Miz' Levy got a poor shade of red on—and that mink. It is three seasons old, and beginning to look so. Poor woman, her party looks quite unhappy. We'll have to go down to cheer them up later. And whose is that precious itty bitty baby? My, my, what a sweetums." Sadie's voice came low and husky.

"Mahcia dear, get some champagne. The best you have. I see Miz' Levy's got some." She turned to the table. "I want you to have the very best, for you are our friends." She reached up and splashed her pink lips on her husband's cheek. "Right, dahling?" T.J. grunted.

Mrs. Levy shed her mink, which fell to the floor. The baby was patting his mashed potato. The cherry from his last kiddie cocktail was imbedded in the white mush. Mrs. Levy had a successful party after all. The women giggled, the man grinned, and more drinks were in order—also, another round for baby who had assumed the role of mascot.

"Yup, she said that right in front of his face—right in front of his goddam face . . ."

"He teed off like a pro, but, ohgod what a swing."

The noise of Mrs. Levy's guests was annoying Tony. He was circling the room, looking at the ceiling. The baby burped.

"What dat?"

"No one, dearie."

"Dat, Mommie, who dat: Daddy, who dat?"

Tony stopped to pat the gold curls, but resumed his pacing as he felt the sudden silence. Cute kid, he thought.

"Dat man, Mommie, dat man gonna fix 'em?"

"Eat your potato, darling." Baby continued to follow Tony's rounds. Round and round and round and round.

"Man gonna' fix 'em," he murmured.

III

Sadie's table was melting in their wine, and wine mixed with party behavior left a talkative slush. Edna, page-boy erect, wandered past to check the exact amount of conversation against the amount of time the party had been in progress, and the amount of business from the bar. The menus had made red lines on her freckled arm. The tension had made gray lines on her rouged face.

"Musha, empty the ashtrays."

"Yas'm," said Marcia, "but I just did."

"Well, it don't look it."

"Yas'm."

Dirk Walters was doodling on the placard, outlining the swirl-in-g monogram. Marcia jarred his hand as she reached for the black ashtray.

"Look," he snickered to Marian Lipsey. The S.I.B. had been changed to S.O.B. "Ha, ha." The joke passed around the table. Sadie did not laugh.

"Don't you think," she said, pulling the wandering strands together with her emphatic soprano, "don't you think that only people with high I.Q.'s should be mated. I mean, you know, intelligent people with intelligent people. I often thought how lucky our son is to have two such perfectly-matched parents."

It was the general consensus that this should be the case. If only Hitler hadn't been such a failure, his good points might have survived, said T.J. jovially. A real shame. Only Dirk Walters disagreed.

"Mahcia, bring Mr. Walters another martini. His is gone." Sadie pushed the unfortunate placard into the ashtray, at the same moment lifting her half-burned cigarette from the grooved rim. After inhaling daintily she blew the smoke out in a precise line, and in replacing the cigarette, she touched its fiery tip to the white card. Dirk's joke burned harmlessly to ashes. The candles had been blown

out long ago—their heat had been uncomfortable. Now the only light came from the glass-bound chandelier.

But eyes were turned from the spectacle of flame to one of action. The baby had escaped and was following Tony around in circles, laughing, playing, pulling at his blue cotton trousers.

"Wha chu doin'?" You gonna' fix 'em?"

"Ja, ja," said Tony. "You watch. I'm gonna fix 'em. Wait here." Without breaking pace he headed for the door.

"Here, itty bitty diddums. Come to Sadie. What a precious little boy." She clutched him in her lap, ignoring his struggles to descend, glaring at him through steeled eyes. He began to whimper.

"All right, go then. Unfriendly brat, isn't he? Parents do spoil kids nowadays. Our baby was never like that!" She brushed her dress of his bits of mashed potato.

Tony had re-entered the room, trailing a large ladder, and the child rushed to him.

Edna strode from the side of the hall, distrust overcoming her carefully ordered features.

"What are you doing? You are more stupid than I thought."

Tony squinted and pointed a stubby finger to a spot directly above Sadie's centerpiece.

"See that light? Ees going to burn away. I must replace eet. Eet ees my job." He finished triumphantly.

Putting the ladder on the floor, he tiptoed up to Sadie.

"Madame, a light will burn out pleese. I must fix 'em. You will have to be kind and move." He gave her chair a slight tug.

"Well, did you ever," breathed Sadie. She addressed the group. "You'll have to excuse him—he is not . . . well, you know." She flicked her cigarette. "Dirk, can I come and sit next to you?" She giggled. "Everyone else is too drunk. Such a lovely party." Dirk dragged Sadie's chair around next to his. They both sat watching the old man as he spread the aluminum legs of the ladder, secured the catch, and began to climb. The baby stood clinging to the lowest rung, his head hung back to watch the dusty shoes as they moved.

"Up, up," said baby.

"Ja," beamed Tony from above. "Up, up."

From the other table, Mrs. Levy's guests had been looking.

"What is he doing," squealed Mrs. Levy. "Did a light burn out over Sadie's table? How awful!" She smiled. "The baby is enjoying himself anyway." Tony was still climbing, shaking the ladder as

he mounted each crossbar to make sure of its sturdiness.

"Oh, Ed, the baby is trying to climb the ladder." It was Sadie who had noticed it first, but it was Mrs. Levy who spoke. She had been watching Sadie.

T.J. grunted.

"Ed, go get your brat, for God's sake," laughed Mrs. Levy. Daddy Ed caught his hand on the tablecloth as he pushed his chair back, and his steak knife clattered to the floor.

"Goddam," he muttered. "Gimme that goddam kid." He swung off towards the ladder, as his wife's voice flew after him.

"Honey, be careful with teensy weensy." Ed moved faster.

"C'mon buster," Ed growled at the child.

"No, Daddy, no." The child balanced precariously on his stomach over the first rung.

"Aw," said T.J. "Leave him be. He's having his fun, too."

"Listen, whose son is he? Mine, ain't he? Well, mind yer own stinkin' party." Ed slipped on a piece of asparagus.

"Goddam." He grabbed his offspring and tucked the boy under his left arm.

T.J.'s face was getting blotchy, and his nose was the brightest blotch of all.

"Call my party lousy, huh? Well, kid, you just see who's boss."

"Oh, honey, leave him be." Sadie was enjoying herself.

"Yeah?" said T.J. "I'll mind him." He jerked himself out of the chair and that was when it happened.

No one really heard anything. It was the sight of the blue-overalled man stretched out under the toppled ladder and the champagne trickling down over his shoes. The light bulb lay unbroken within his opened hand. The silence was what was terrible. And T.J. standing there rubbing his shoulder.

Sadie began to scream, and Mrs. Levy came running, the two united in their excitement.

"Ed, are you O.K.?" asked Mrs. Levy. She had not seen it happen. She had been untwining her mink from the chair legs.

"Yeah," said Ed, "but it ain't his fault." He pointed at T.J., who was filling a water glass with champagne.

Edna arrived.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry, Sadie darling. I told Tony to keep away."

"Well, you should have locked him up," screamed Sadie. "Look, he ruined two parties with his assinine behavior. And he's probably

dead, though I do hope not. People take the damndest times to die. That's what I told Mom when Dad died. I was in Paris and had to come home."

"We'll get it all cleaned up," purred Edna. "Does the baby want another kiddie cocktail? Sure, he does." She stroked his curls with a firm hand.

"He fix 'em," said baby, watching the motionless Tony. "He fix 'em."