



Series 2

Episode 19

Everybody Wants to be a Cat

Renata Screeds opened her eyes. The room was dark, but she didn't need that to tell her that it was the middle of the night. There was a pain in her lower back. She must have been sleeping in an odd position. She was lying on her side now, and she gently rolled onto her back. That helped a little bit.

As she moved, seven or eight of her cats shifted their position on her bed, including the two that were under the covers. The old woman didn't pay them much notice. They were like the waves shifting around a ship, adjusting like the sea to whatever passed through it. There were other cats in the house as well, twelve or thirteen altogether; she wasn't sure because one of them, Lefty, had disappeared about a week ago. He may have gotten out and been eaten by the coyote that prowled this particular New Jersey neighborhood, or he may have just died of natural causes. He was, after all, nearly twenty years old, which is ancient for a cat that likes to pretend that he's half feral.

As Renata Screeds lie on her bed staring at the ceiling, she wondered if she'd fall back to sleep soon enough to get a decent rest for the night. Maybe, maybe not. She was not the world's greatest sleeper. Never had been. Too many debate tournaments for too many years, among other things. Some might say those other things included too many cats. She didn't. Her cats were her family. Them, and her debate students. The two were a better family than the real thing in many ways. Which is the sort of thing anyone

who is a little past retirement age, unmarried and with no close relatives might say.

She rubbed her left arm, which felt a little heavy. She had been sleeping on that side, and in addition to her aching back, she now had an aching arm. And there seemed to be a couple of cats pressing down on her chest.

But there weren't.

The pressing on her chest got stronger, as if someone had a hold on her from the rear and was crushing her. She tried to sit up, but couldn't move. All she could do was raise her right arm, which she did, grabbing a three-year old calico cat by the neck, causing it to scream out in surprise.

Renata Screeds couldn't scream. She couldn't talk. She could barely breathe.

And then she wasn't breathing. Not a hint of it.

The cats reorganized themselves. Some of them beside her, two of them on top of her, a couple under the covers. And that would be the sight that met her housekeeper the next morning: an elderly woman dying peacefully in her sleep, surrounded by her beloved pets.

Thank goodness she had a housekeeper. In a couple of days those "beloved pets"—

But we won't go there. You know exactly what we're talking about.

In any case, Renata Screeds had passed away, after a long, prosperous career as a teacher and debate coach at Andrew Johnson High School, "Home of the Unimpeachable Education."

And the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial varsity tournament—with its side event The Little Johnson, the first tournament for local novices—was only two weeks away. Would this event, which was one of the longest-lived in the region, not happen for the first time in anyone's memory? Was there anyone at the school who could take it over and make it happen? Because that was the greatest tragedy of all in debate circles, where a program was so dependent on one person that, when that person went, either to greener pastures of another school or the greenest pastures of the local cemetery, the program went with them.

Would that also be the fate of Andrew Johnson?

At 4:13 a.m. that night, with the body still warm and undiscovered by the housekeeper, and the cats still cuddling their former owner, that question had yet to be answered.

At Andrew Johnson High School, “Home of the Unimpeachable Education,” the entire staff had been called to a meeting in the library immediately following the last period. Since the sooner they got this over with the sooner everyone could head home, the room had filled up quickly. The last person to enter was the principal, Mr. Cimino.

“Thank you all for coming,” he began. An older, ruffled man, he always seemed to be half undone, or, if you’re an optimist, half done. His shirt was slightly untucked over his unfortunately large stomach, and his tie was an inch lower than it should be, neither apparently by design. And he looked as if he hadn’t combed his hair since the Reagan administration. “I have some sad news to announce.”

The staff members in the room immediately concluded the worst, that there was about to be another round of layoffs. Andrew Johnson had already trimmed five percent of its staff, in addition to attrition. Whenever there was bad business news, people immediately assumed there would be more bad business news. The last layoffs had been last September. A year had passed waiting for that proverbial other shoe to drop.

But that was not Mr. Cimino’s message. “We heard this morning that our colleague Ms. Screed has passed away. According to the report we received, Renate passed away peacefully in her sleep during the night of natural causes.”

“Was anyone with her at the time?” someone asked.

“Just her cats,” Mr. Cimino replied. “Why? Are you suggesting foul play? Or that Renate was involved in some sort of love cult?”

“No. It’s just that we always assume that people pass away peacefully in their sleep, but for all we know she went through six hours of total, isolated agony and then she died, a psychic, lonely wreck.”

Mr. Cimino narrowed his eyes. “Thank you for that,” he said. He cleared his throat. “It is too soon of course to figure out any reassignments of Renate’s classes, which I promise to handle as quickly as possible. However, we do have one important issue to discuss. As all of you know, Renate was our debate coach for the last fifty years or so, and was in charge of running our debate tournament here at Andy J. That tournament is scheduled in less than two weeks.”

There was a small wave of muttering in the crowd.

“Cancel the damned thing,” offered the same person as the one who had pointed out the misery that might have taken Renate Screeds out in the night. “Kids come in and tear the place to shreds, including everything on my desk and in my drawers. I can live without it.”

“This tournament is a longtime tradition here, plus it is a fundraiser for our team, without which we would have to eliminate the activity in these difficult financial times.” Mr. Cimino shook his head. “We will not be canceling the tournament.”

There was more to come, and everyone waited.

“The problem is, as you can imagine, running the tournament, and for that matter running the debate team, is a big responsibility. We need someone to take over for Renate immediately.”

No one breathed for fear that it would be seen as volunteering.

“The Andrew Johnson Debate Team is one of the pillars on which our academic program is based,” Mr. Cimino continued. “Extracurricular, that is.”

Still no breathing. There wasn't a person in that room who didn't understand that, unlike every other extracurricular activity, the debate team was not simply an occasional or at most a seasonal addition to one's schedule. Debate was every weekend, week in and week out, and afternoons, and nights. Debate was selling your soul. Debate was more work than teaching APs. Hell, debate was more work than teaching the juvenile delinquents in the special Home Ec for Felons class that the school had recently launched at the penitentiary at the edge of town.

“At least we need someone to take things on pro tem,” Mr. Cimino went on. “There must be someone here who has some experience—any experience—with debate.”

A hand slowly rose in the back of the room.

“Yes?” the principal asked.

“Is that a paid position?” the owner of the hand asked in a soft voice.

“There is a level two stipend,” Mr. Cimino responded.

“I, uh, might be able to do it.”

“I'm sorry,” Mr. Cimino said. “I don't recognize you.”

“I've just started as a sub. But I used to debate in high school.”

A smile began to form at the edges of the principal's mouth. “Really?”

The young man at the back of the room nodded. About five foot ten and frighteningly thin, he had a shaggy look not unlike the principal's dishevelment, but about thirty years less developed. “I debated for Nighten Day. Under Tarnish Jutmoll.”

“That's excellent!”

“I could use the money,” the young man went on. “Can't buy beans on a sub's salary.”

There was laughter in the room at this, both at the words and at the realization that for the rest of them, the bullet had been dodged. A volunteer

had come forward, rather than having been pulled out of the pack against his or her will.

“And you are...?”

“Buglaroni,” the young man replied. “Hamlet P. Buglaroni. Junior.”

By now the principal was grinning ear to ear. “Well, Hamlet, welcome aboard. Do you have a few minutes? We could talk privately.”

“Sure.”

“What about Renate?” the original grump teacher interrupted. “What about telling our students? What about grief counseling?”

The principal turned to the grump. “You know, Renate Screeds was about twenty years past normal retirement age. I don’t think that too many students are going to be terribly surprised or distraught by her passing.”

“We should at least have a memorial service of some sort. To mark her leaving us.”

“You wouldn’t be leaving us any time soon, would you?” The principal had had enough. “We would definitely have a celebration if *that* were to happen.”

The offending grump stood up. “How dare you! I’m reporting you to the union immediately.” He stomped out of the room.

There was a moment of silence, and then Mr. Cimino shrugged. “Thank you all for coming. And Hamlet, come with me please. We need to talk.”

The meeting broke up, and the young man followed the older man back to his office.

It was the beginning of a new day for forensics at Andrew Johnson High School.

Who is going to adopt all of Renate Screeds’s cats now that she has gone to that great tournament in the sky?

Is Hamlet P. Buglaroni going to become the star of N2?

And speaking of which, whatever happened to Cartier Diamond, anyhow?

Is this whole N2 thing simply an exercise in “whatever happened to”?

Does the question mark go before or after the quotation marks in that last sentence?

We know, sort of, but we'll be lying about it in our next reality-based episode: "The Biggest Loser Debate Teams of the Stars on the Jersey Shore, or, Ashton Kutcher: The Lawrence Olivier of the Twenty-First Century?"