



Series 2

Episode 2: Too Many Beans for Dinner

Billy Muffle lay on his bed staring up at the ceiling. He had been in this position for an hour since arriving home at about five o'clock this afternoon. It was the first full week of school, and this had been the longest day of that week so far. Out of bed at six, on the bus at six thirty, classes starting at seven thirty, lunch at ten thirty—lunch at ten thirty?—it was class after class after class after class after class, then finally the debate meeting. At this point Billy was hungry, grumpy, tired and totally zoned out. And according to his careful calculations, he estimated he had about thirty hours of homework assignments that were due tomorrow.

And what did you learn in school today, Billy Muffle?

“Today I learned that, whatever it is that you’re eating at ten thirty in the morning, the one thing that it isn’t is lunch. And aside than that, not much at all.”

Was this going to be the entire story of the next four years?

He moaned. Oooooohhhhhh....

He felt as if he should pull himself up and at least get something to eat, but he just didn’t have the energy. He could hear faint music coming from his sister’s room down the hall. She was just starting seventh grade at the middle school, and she had arrived home a little after he had, full of energy and excitement. Billy wished that he was back in seventh grade, full of middle schoolian energy and excitement. Oh, Billy thought: the golden years. They had passed him by. It was all uphill from here.

He moaned again. Oooooohhhhhh....

Billy reached over and grabbed his iPod from the bed table. The sound of his sister’s tweeny pop was just loud enough to turn his stomach, empty

though it was. He couldn't wait until she was old enough to goth up or something, whatever it took her not to find her only source of music being stars from the Disney Channel. Unless Mickey Mouse pierced his tongue, got a few tats and maybe a rap sheet with half a dozen priors, Billy did not think he would ever find anything interesting there for his own music pleasure. He liked to think of himself at the cutting edge of music, listening only to small, new, independent groups, some of whom could almost play their instruments. If it was on television—any television—it probably wasn't his thing. Not even close.

Billy closed his eyes. He really should get something to eat. He really should start his homework. He really...shouldn't...fall...asleep...

Dinner at the Muffle household was, as far as Billy was concerned, the worst part of the day. Considering how bad the day had been, not to mention the homework that was still facing him, undone, un-even-started, that was saying quite a lot.

On one side of the dinner table, Billy's mother was going on and on about how great it would be for Billy to be on the debate team. "You'll learn all kinds of great things. You'll learn how to craft a point of view, and speak well in public."

Billy, his eyes on his dinner plate, grunted. Tonight's meal was some sort of beans and kale combination. Where did his parents come up with this stuff? Beans and kale?

On the other side from his mother, Billy's father was typing on his BlackBerry. Work accompanied Billy's father no matter where he was like an imaginary friend, an inescapable presence represented by a series of ever more technologically capable smartphones that, one after the other, inextricably tethered him to his 24 by 7 workplace. Billy's father was a bond trader, and as he always said, the market never sleeps. Nor, it would seem, did Billy's father.

"What are you going to be debating about?" Billy's mother asked.

Billy grunted again. He had no idea what he'd be debating about. He didn't even know if he'd go back to the next meeting.

"When's your first tournament?"

Grunt. This looked like a piece of bacon, at least, buried among all that green and white bean and kaleness, and that was something. As hungry as he was, Billy couldn't not eat the dinner, but that didn't mean he had to enjoy it.

“Have you thought of any other extracurriculars?” his mother asked.

“You should do some sports!” Billy’s sister piped up from her seat across from Billy. She was a lot like Billy’s mother. The two of them were, genetically, the perky side of the family, assuming that there is a gene for perk. Billy and his dad were the genetically serious side. Or something like that. At least that was the family mythology, and Billy didn’t bother to dispute it.

Billy’s eyes lifted from his plate and met his sister’s. Sports? That wasn’t even worth a grunt.

“I know debate will help you get into a good college,” Billy’s mother went on.

Grunt. It *was* bacon. Thank you, God.

And for that matter, Thank you, pig.

“Damn it!” Billy’s father said loudly.

No one at the table responded. They were used to his exclamations, both negative and positive, reacting to whatever it was that he was doing on his BlackBerry.

“What’s the debate coach like?” Billy’s mother asked.

Billy shrugged. How did he know what the coach was like? “Some old guy,” he muttered. It was the first words he had spoken since he had sat down.

“Does he teach too?”

Billy went back to grunting. With his three previous words he felt he had made enough of a brilliant contribution to the conversation to last the rest of the meal.

“I guess I’ll meet him parents’ night. What about your other teachers?” she went on.

Billy took the biggest forkful of beans at the meal so far. The sooner he ate this slop, the sooner he could get out of here and back up to do his homework. If he did do it, that is. He did figure he could postpone some of it until tomorrow morning, and do it on the bus. Or maybe during lunch. What else was he going to do at lunch at ten thirty in the morning? It was too early to eat anything. He could do Math, maybe. That would work. Earth Science tonight, English on the bus, Math at lunch. That would definitely work.

“Isn’t high school exciting, Billy?” his mother asked him.

Billy nodded.

He’d never been so excited in his whole life.

Jeesh!

Will Billy Muffle be able to maintain his high level of enthusiasm over being in high school?

Will Billy's mother find a way to splice out the perk gene and sell it on the open market to the terminally depressed?

Will Billy get his homework done before tomorrow's classes, or will he fall so far behind that in two weeks he'll have to go back to middle school and start all over again, beginning with remedial courses in Miley Cyrus?

Are there remedial courses in Miley Cyrus?

Is there really a Miley Cyrus?

If you're looking for the answers to these or any questions, I wouldn't expect to find them in our next episode: "The Dog Ate My Homework, or, If I Had a Dog He *Would* Have Eaten My Homework, So Is That Good Enough?"