



## Series 2

### Episode 24

#### Grandma's Balls, Among Others

"It's so sad, Ms. Screeds dying and everything," the voice came across the telephone line.

"It is sad," Buglaroni responded.

"She was such a good debate coach."

"Yes, she was," Buglaroni agreed. He was standing in his kitchen, talking on his land-line phone while Haagen swirled around him making dinner, her legendary meatballs. Buglaroni groaned inwardly. Haagen's legendary extra heavy meatballs was more like it. He thought back to his youth and Grandma Buglaroni. Oh, yeah. Grandma Buglaroni—now *she* could make a meatball. You could eat half a dozen of them and they'd melt in your mouth, one after the other, because they'd been cooking on the back burner of the stove in the tomato gravy for days and days and days, maybe months and months and months and months. Maybe she had brought them over with her from the Old Country. Haagen's meatballs, on the other hand, took a lot less time to cook, and never gave the kitchen that homey tomato-y smell, and one bite tended to fill you up for the next couple of weeks, easily. As Haagen rattled the pots and pans, Ben and Jerry were doing likewise, sitting in a corner of the kitchen banging copper pots with wooden spoons in time to whatever music was playing in their devious little twin brains.

"It will be a long time before there's another Renata Screeds," the voice on the telephone continued.

"A very long time," Buglaroni echoed.

“I’ve got eight sons, Mr. Buglaroni,” the woman said. “Eight sons, do you hear me?”

“I hear you.” He looked down at the banging twins and imagined multiplying them by four. Inconceivable.

“For year after year Ms. Screeds took my boys and made debaters out of them. They were delinquents before she got to them. Delinquents, I tell you. Heading for Attica. Heading for Alcatraz. A life in prison.”

“I don’t think Alcatraz is a prison anymore, Mrs. Plonk.”

“Well, it would be if it wasn’t for Ms. Screeds. My Tony is the last of my boys. He’s going to be a junior this year. You know my Tony, right?”

Buglaroni felt as if he *should* know her Tony, if for no better reason than to be able to identify the potential felons on the team, but that didn’t seem like the right answer at the moment. “I’ve just started with the team,” he said.

“Well, you will know him. Trust me. That boy stands out in a crowd.”

“Alcatraz would have been proud of him, I’m sure,” Buglaroni said as Haagen pushed him against the wall while she opened a drawer he had been standing in front of. “The reason I’m calling, Mrs. Plonk, is because Tony tells me you’re in charge of our food at the the tournament next week.”

“In charge of it? I *am* your food at the tournament next week. The Plonks have run food at the Deconstruction Memorial since my very first boy went through the school.”

Buglaroni didn’t bother to correct her. Deconstruction, Reconstruction. It was all the same. He had a feeling that her family knew a lot about construction per se, at least as a front for their real businesses. The de and the re were just bonuses. It wasn’t as if Buglaroni didn’t have a whiff or two of the Family in his own background. After all, he had read all of Nostrum Series 1. He knew all about the Dons, and you would too if you had read Series 1, but this whole tearing down the fourth wall business is way too postmodern for the room, if you ask us, which you didn’t, so let’s get back to business.

“So you know what you’re doing?” Buglaroni asked.

“Do I know what I’m doing? Mr. Buglaroni, I could do it in my sleep. A couple of years I *did* do it in my sleep. I could do it in your sleep, if I had to.”

“So I don’t have anything to worry about?”

“Nothing,” she asserted. “Everything is ordered, the families are signed up to help serve, the office has put through the money. All you have to do is come to the tournament at dinnertime with a big appetite.”

“That’s good to hear, Mrs. Plonk.”

“Mafalda,” she told him. “Call me Mafalda.”

“Okay, Mrs. Plonk, I’ll do that. Thank you. Thank you very much.”  
He hung up the phone.

“Everything working out?” Haagen asked him. She was molding raw meat into spheres the size of softballs and laying them out on a cookie tin.

“I’ve got buses for the weekend, I know where I’m going, I’ve got food set up for the tournament next week. Now all I need is housing and access to firmguns.com so I can see the registration.”

A wooden spoon went flying past Buglaroni’s nose. The twins were getting restless.

“I’m going to go check my email one more time,” he said. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Take your time,” Haagen told him. “The meatballs won’t be ready for another twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes? From cold raw to piping hot? Cooked?

God, he missed Grandma’s balls.

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Dude Firmguns opened one eye.

The room was seriously red. Maroon, maybe? No, cinnabar actually, the color of Chinese lacquerware. The bedstead around the mattress he was lying on could have been in a museum.

So why was he lying on a Chinese emperor’s bed in the middle of a museum?

“You’re awake,” a voice said softly.

He rolled over and looked to the other side of the bed. Two beautiful young women, both six feet tall and Asian, dressed in white robes, were standing over him solicitously. He remembered now. They were sisters. One of them was named Wong. Come to think of it, so was the other one. If they had any other names, they hadn’t told him. “You can call us Wong,” they had said, and that’s what he had done. He did recall thinking at some point, how can something so right be so Wong?

“We have tea for you,” Wong said.

“And bean cakes,” Wong added.

Dude smiled. “What time is it?” he asked.

“Six o’clock,” Wong said.

He sat up and smiled. “It’s time to get to work,” he said.

“Tea first,” Wong insisted. She had crossed over to the other side of the bed and begun massaging his shoulders as Wong handed him his tea. Or maybe it was the other way around.

“I’ve got a tournament to run tomorrow,” Dude said.

“It will be there in ten minutes,” Wong told him.

“You need to rise from sleep slowly,” Wong added. “It is better for the soul.”

The tea was light and refreshing. And the soft massaging of his shoulders was also light and refreshing.

The tournament would still be there in ten minutes.

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The principal stared at the email message. There was a breach on one of their computers?

Normally she wouldn’t even be here at this time of day, but it was still early in the school year and there always seemed to be too many things going on with too many different people during school hours, and this was the only chance she had to truly get organized for the year. There was a school board meeting next Monday, there was a half-day curriculum event on Tuesday, there were some mandated sessions on multiculturalism that all her teachers would be taking later in the year that she had to take first. That was next Thursday, and for that she had to drive up to Albany.

Being a principal was not all sitting around eating chocolates and rah-rahing the football team and declaring lockdowns whenever a student was discovered with a Tylenol in his gym socks. She sighed. Whatever happened to the good old days, when kids just went to school and studied or pretended to study or simply didn’t show up, and a principal was a cross between Gandhi, Benjamin Franklin and St. Augustine? Nowadays a principal was a cross between Joseph Stalin and... She paused. There was no cross involved. A high school principal, including herself, was the modern equivalent of Stalin, minus the power of the purge.

And she had so wanted to be that cross between Gandhi and Benjamin Franklin and St. Augustine.

She picked up the telephone and dialed the number on the email.

“This is Scott,” a voice answered a moment later. He had a remarkably thick Indian accent for anyone named Scott.

“Yes. This is Ida Lupino, the principal at Nighten Day High School. We got a message that there’s been a breach on one of our computers.”

“Yes, very good. Hold on please.”

The voice went off, replaced by music. Rick Astley music, actually. Principal Lupino figured he was probably still popular in India. Unless she was being Rick Rolled.

“Yes, very good,” the voice came back on. “You are Nighten Day High School.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Lupino said.

“You have a breach from your system.”

“A security breach?” That could be bothersome, if some student could figure out a way to break in and see exams before they were given. Lots of teachers kept their tests on their networked computers.

“We have had to lock out one of your users,” Scott went on. “For, uh...” He paused. “Oh my, this is not good.” There was a loud series of clicks that sounded like typing on a computer keyboard. “Oh my goodness.” Pause. More typing. “Oh no no no no no.”

Principal Lupino couldn’t help but feel Scott’s alarm. “What is it?” she asked.

“One of your students, Mrs. Principal Lupino, is being very, very nasty. Oh, very, very nasty.”

“Nasty?”

“These are websites—Oh my, they are very bad. Very nasty. Lots of people doing things, oh my goodness, I didn’t know anyone could even do these things.” More typing. “Great guns, look at that!”

“Scott, please. What’s going on there?”

“One of your students is a very big pornography fan, Mrs. Principal Lupino. These are sites even we haven’t seen before, and we are seasoned professionals.” Click. Click click click. Click. “Okay, I have them bookmarked. Oh my goodness.”

“Why are you bookmarking them?”

“We are the help desk, Mrs. Principal Lupino. Some day these sites will be very helpful.”

“You said that you had to lock out one of my students? Which one?”

“Oh, a very nasty one, let me tell you. Let me get his name.” Pause. Click click click. “Here it is.” Pause. “I cannot pronounce it. It is not American. What kind of school do you have there, with no Americans?”

“Scott, please. What is the name?”

He spelled it out. “L E M O N D E space H A U T B O Y.”

Principal Lupino wrinkled her nose. “Hautboy LeMonde?”

“That is the name, if that is how you pronounce it. Is that a typical American name? We have never run across that name before.”

“No,” the principal replied. “It’s a Nostrum name. You probably won’t ever see it again.” She shook her head. Now she was tearing down the fourth wall. This had to stop. “Could you give me more information on these websites?”

“I cannot talk about these to a woman, Mrs. Principal Lupino. Not even my own wife. Or even my other wife!”

“Can you send me a list, at least?”

“I will email you a list of the links, Mrs. Principal Lupino. But I am warning you, if you look at these websites you will never be the same again.”

“What I don’t understand is how Hautboy could get to these sites in the first place. Don’t we prevent users from getting to these places?”

“The software prevents the access, yes, but it can’t stop a user from requesting access. After a user puts in five requests in a row, they automatically get locked out.”

She nodded. “So he didn’t actually go to these sites.”

“No,” Scott said. “But he tried.”

A new email appeared on her screen, also from the help desk at AidCorp. It was from Scott. She opened it. It was the list of the websites. They were, in order,

- 1 [redacted]
- 2 [redacted]
- 3 [redacted]
- 4 [redacted]
- 5 [redacted]

**NOTE FROM THE PRODUCERS OF NOSTRUM: This is a family-oriented high school debate soap opera website, and we refuse to sink to the level of listing naughty bit websites, unlike those other high school debate soap opera websites that flout family values and don’t even know the meaning of the word flout. Thank you for understanding.**

Principal Lupino was appalled. She couldn’t even say the names of the sites out loud. She now understood Scott’s reticence about them.

“How do I reactivate Hautboy’s account?” she asked, although at the moment she couldn’t imagine ever letting him near a computer again.

“I will send you the password for administration in your school. Just go to any computer on which he tries to log on and enter the password, and you’ll be able to reaccess him. Wait a minute.” Pause. “There.”

She received another email. She opened it.

“That’s the password?” she asked.

“That’s the password,” he agreed.

“You’re telling me the password for Nighten Day is ‘Nighnten Day’?”

“It is a very good password,” Scott said.

“What do you mean, it’s a very good password? It’s a terrible password. You’re supposed to be IT professionals. I thought good passwords were supposed to mix and match numbers and letters and be totally unpredictable, like the ones you force us to use to access our accounts.”

“That is true,” Scott agreed.

“This is the name of the school!” she protested. “No numbers, no mix and match. It’s totally predictable!”

“Aha!” he said. “Exactly. Who would ever guess that the administration would use something so simple? Very clever, eh?”

She shook her head. Yeah. Very clever. “Okay, Scott. Thank you. Do we need to do anything else?”

“Oh no,” he said. “If you want to reactivate his account, just do so when he logs in. Otherwise, he’ll never compute at Nighten Day High School again.”

“Okay, Scott. Thank you.”

“And thank you, Mrs. Principal Lupino.” He hung up.

Principal Lupino put down the phone. Why did she have an image of the alleged “Scott” now furiously surfing on his computer, in a manner totally NSFW?

Oh, well. What happens in India stays in India. This was Nighten Day. India was a long way off. And tomorrow, she would confront Hautboy LeMonde.

She shook her head and whistled softly as she took one last look at the list of websites. Hautboy LeMonde? Welcome to the Bahamas.

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***Will Mrs. Plonk serve a delicious and nutritious meal to the participants of the Deconstruction/Reconstruction Memorial?***

***Will Haagen Dazs-Buglaroni serve a delicious and nutritious meatball to Hamlet P. Buglaroni in only twenty minutes?***

***Has Nostrum always stooped to the level of puns on the name Wong (not that there’s anything Wong with that)?***

*Will Scott from India get caught checking out the list of Hautboy's websites?*

*And how did Lily Maru find those websites in the first place?*

*Is the Tea Party monitoring this episode, waiting for us to make the tiniest slip, so that they can sic Sarah Palin on us?*

*How sic is Sarah Palin?*

**The answers, which are few and far between, are eleven, the Thane of Cawdor, and North Dakota, and are not even hinted at in our next episode: "One little tornado and Brooklyn goes all Apocalypse on us, or, if you've had enough Wong jokes, how do you feel about Sean Bean? Shawn Bawn? Seen Bean? Sheen Bawn? Whatever."**