



Series 2

Episode 5: The Retirement Die is Cast

Tarnish Jutmoll was old enough to be the principal's father. Hell, he was old enough to be the principal's grandfather! And still, Tarnish felt a little on edge, sitting in the principal's office, meeting with the boss. The boss who graduated college—when? The boss who thought Britney Spears was an oldies act? The boss who had still been in high school when Tarnish had first thought about, just possibly, retiring? And the boss who now he was going to tell that he was, once and for all, retiring for good?

How many principals had Tarnish Jutmoll survived over the years? He could barely keep track of them. In the beginning there had been only one, an old-timer named John Ford, who had been at the school probably since ground had first been broken for it during the Grover Hayes Administration. Principal Ford had stayed on for probably a decade of Jutmoll's early teaching career, before going off into whatever sunset retired principals went off into, beyond which they were never heard from again. After Ford, the deluge. There had seemed to be one principal after another, none of them lasting more than a year or two, an endless parade through Nighten Day of eager faces full of ideas, of men and women making statements to the school board about how they were going to grapple with the special problems of education today, in the here and now, to bring change where it was needed, to respect the past when the past had proven itself, to embrace the future when it pointed the way to the best in American education, to settle down and make their lifetime careers here in Nighten Township, because this is the sort of place they have dreamed of since that very first moment in kindergarten when they realized, "When I grow up, I want to be a principal!" The other kids? They were all pointing toward doctor or lawyer or Indian

chief, and had been getting special tutoring to aid them in their quests. But the principals of tomorrow? They were so obsessed with their ultimate careers that at the age of six they moved into roving tribes of local principals who were living off the land, just to get a sense of what principaling was all about, so that when the time came, they'd be there ringing that class bell, greeting every single student by name (and not just the ones who were always in detention), shaking hands with the parents as his partners in education—the usual song and dance. Some of them had even threatened to eliminate speech and debate, “in the face of this incredible economy that is affecting us all”—and then they, too, had gone off into the sunset, never to be heard from again.

And now Tarnish Jutmoll was going off into that same sunset.

Never to be heard from again.

“So how's the debate team looking this year?” Principal Lupino asked him. She was wearing a Nighten Day Football sweatshirt despite the early September heat in her non-air-conditioned office, stressing the point that she looked no more than a week past the age of one of her own seniors. She was a small, round woman in her second year at the helm of the school. She was notoriously gung-ho for all extracurricular activities, and seemed to have a sweatshirt or a hoodie or a hat for every contingency. Except speech and debate. Speech and debate at Nighten Day didn't have sweatshirts or hoodies or hats. Forensic schools that did have fan apparel were usually looked at askance by their peers, especially since only the team members themselves wore any of it, making them look like a little army of fallen cheerleaders who couldn't make the team. All of the actual fans of forensics—if any—would have been too embarrassed to wear any supportive apparel. It was just...not right.

“It's too early to tell how we're doing, Ida,” Jutmoll answered.

“We've had the preliminary meeting where we explain everything to them. After that, we lose a few, and maybe still gain a few. Anything could happen.”

“How about the old-timers? Any up-and-comers there?” Principal Lupino didn't care much about forensics as an educational experience. If students wanted education, they could go to class. Principal Lupino wanted trophies. You could put them on the shelves and point them out to the school board. Trophies warranted the expense of the team. Without trophies, a forensics team was...a club. Like stamp collecting. Or tropical fish fanciers. Which earned you a picture in the yearbook, maybe, but for which no money was ever forthcoming from the school budget.

“I think we’ve got some good prospects for the year,” Jutmoll said, nodding.

“Awesome,” the principal said. Jutmoll realized that she wasn’t using the word in an attempt to be cool, which was good, because the word hadn’t been cool for well over a decade. She was using it because it was a word of her own not-so-long-ago high school career. She didn’t use it because it was cool or not cool, she used it because she thought what Jutmoll had just said was, well, in her vocabulary, awesome.

“I hope so,” Jutmoll said. He had made it a practice never to speak in the language of students, even students who were now the principal. Talking like a teenager was like trying to dress like a teenager: it only worked if you were a teenager, and sometimes it didn’t even work then.

“So what can I do for you?” the principal asked, making no attempt to hide her checking of her watch. The face of the watch was roughly the size of a fast-food hamburger; she didn’t need to wear it around her wrist, because she would have been able to read the time from it from practically any distance. She probably could have even left it at home and still been able to see the time on it. At the moment it was almost ten-twenty, the middle of a period in which Jutmoll had no classes.

“Well,” he began, and then, before he hesitated himself out of saying it at all, he blurted it out. “I’ve decided to retire at the end of this school year.”

Principal Lupino nodded at him. “Going on to greener pastures, eh?” She smiled.

Putting himself out to pasture was more like it, but then he realized that he was probably the first person she had ever dealt with who had ever retired. After all, it was only her second year. No one that he could recall had retired at Nighten Day since her incumbency. She had no idea how to handle the situation. Then again, for that matter, neither did he.

“I guess there’s paperwork,” he suggested.

She looked thoughtful. “I’ll look into it.” She paused. “What about the team?” she asked.

“You’re not worried about who’s going to take over my classes?” he asked, amused. Social studies teachers were a dime a dozen, he knew. His spot in the classroom would be filled before he was half out the door. Forensics coaches, on the other hand, the ones who brought in that steady stream of trophies... Not so easy.

“Well, it’s not that,” she said hastily, although, of course it was that. “But you’ve been with the team for so long.”

“Since the beginning,” he agreed.

“You’ve made it what it is today,” she said.

He nodded. “I don’t want to leave them in the lurch,” he said. “I’ve given some thought to my replacement. There’s no one on the staff that I know about that would want to take over.”

She shook her head. There were plenty of teachers who wanted the stipends that came with extracurriculars, and she could pull out a list of possibles for almost any other coach or adviser who announced imminent departure, but not speech and debate. The other activities were seasonal, or confined to weekdays. Speech and debate never ended, and included nights, weekends and most vacations. Finding speech and debate coaches willing to give up Saturdays and Sundays for the entire school year? She was running a high school, not an insane asylum.

“We’re probably going to have to look outside of Nighten Day,” he went on.

“That’s true.”

“It could take a long time. The question I have is, should we start now? I mean, I could announce my retirement early. People in the activity would hear about it, and perhaps come and check it out. And you could check them out in return.”

She nodded, but more out of the habit of responsive gesture than actual agreement. Hiring an outsider? In this economy? Hiring anybody, for that matter. Then again, hoping that someone inside might step up to the plate, when no one had ever expressed even the slightest interest, while more than a few had gone out of their way to express their lack of interest? *Don’t put me on that debate team*, they would say. *I’ve already got a life*. If she counted on the team surviving without some outsider coming along, she knew she’d be watching it die on the vine. And Nighten Day had a long history of forensics. And the trophy case to prove it.

“So what do you think?” Jutmoll asked. “Want to think about it?”

She nodded some more, but this time in real agreement. “Let me sleep on it,” she said. “Maybe talk to the district people. Speech and debate are very important to the district.”

“It’s important to me to,” Jutmoll said. “I’d like to know that I’m leaving the team in good hands.”

“Me too, Tarnish. Me too.”

She looked at her giant watch again.

The meeting was over.

Is there someone out there hungry enough to replace Tarnish Jutmoll?

*Will the trophy case continue to burst at the seams with tenth-place
Declamation awards granted only due to tab errors?*

*Will the Nighten Day team finally get some fan attire, maybe at least a
headband for the Original Oratory people to keep the sweat out of their
otherwise teary eyes?*

Since when is the governorship of New York such a dead-end job?

*Now that the Olympics are over, isn't everyone happy that Conan is
coming back again at his usual time slot? Oh. Wait a minute.*

**The answers to these questions, and seventy-three others that elude us
at the moment, will not be hinted at in our next episode: "Kevin Smith
Directs 'Fatsos on a Plane,' or, All I wanted was an extra bag of
peanuts."**