



Series 2

Episode 7: Hail, Halefoil, Well Met!

You've walked by it, and you may have seen Audrey Hepburn's Holly Golightly having breakfast in front of it. You may even have gone into it.

Tiffany & Co. On Fifth Avenue, in New York City. The ultimate jewelry store.

On the fourth floor of the Fifth Avenue store, there is a special department that does not sell jewelry. After all, in this establishment you can buy china and flatware and stemware and candlesticks and purses and all manner of items that are neither precious nor semiprecious gems, not worn around the neck nor wrist nor finger, not a tiara, not a clip or a pin, not an earring nor a watch fob. And on the fourth floor of the building, in a corner of which even the most cognizant of the cognoscenti remain blissfully unaware, you can buy...tin.

Halefoil Cumcut visited the Tiffany Tin Department regularly, both as a buyer and an eyer. He loved gazing at the latest in trophy designs, in crystal and silver and (gasp!) plastic (but these latter always in drawers and not for prime display). He didn't need to be in a position to buy them to want to run his fingers over them. And because he so often did buy them, the clerks in their black suits always found time to pull them out from their cases so that he could touch them, fondle them, even caress them. The pleasure he derived from this was, in a word, exquisite. The separation when he might not be buying one this week, the pain of pulling his hand away, of putting the trophy back in its velvet wrapping? Also, in a word, exquisite. A connoisseur

of trophy tin could have it no other way. Of course, Halefoil Cumcut never referred to the winning of trophies as the taking of tin. There was no tin in his trophies, unless occasionally alloyed with a soupcon of copper, to make bronze, which was acceptable. Silver and gold, better still. With finances being what they are, though, crystal was the most likely, precious not in its inherent makeup (although different) but in its working, its craftsmanship. Cumcut could lecture you, if you were inclined to listen, on the properties of lead in glass that differentiate crystal from windows and Flintstone juice glasses, but most people, especially forensicians, have little interest in heightened refractive indices and reduced viscosity. So we won't delve into that any further in these pages ourselves. Look it up, if you, like Cumcut, really care.

Today Cumcut was on his most deliberate mission of the year, the acquisition of the trophies for the Vaganza. Or, as it was officially known, "The Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza (All other vaganzas are extra)." As a rule, Cumcut would refer to it by its full name, leaving out the parenthetical byline. Calling it simply the Vaganza, in Cumcut's mind, devalued its importance. It was the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza, just like the school was Manhattan Lodestone, not simply Lodestone, as the vast majority of people in the universe who were not a part of it referred to it.

Halefoil Cumcut was a stickler on the details.

At the moment the clerk, a young woman in a navy suit of jacket over modest-length skirt, very traditional and Tiffany conservative, was showing Cumcut samples of the crystal compounds available for this year's awards. To anyone else, it looked as if she had put three lumps of glass on a piece of cloth and laid it on the countertop. To Cumcut, it was the heartbreaking decision between, well, refractive indices and viscosities. Heartbreaking to Cumcut, in other words, having to choose among them, leaving out two because he could only have one. Of course, he could put the others on hold for future trophies. None were as important as those for the Vaganza, but they were still important. If an event had trophies, then the trophies had to be important. That was the logic with which Cumcut made his determinations when it came to tournament tin.

He would, again, bristle, of course, at our calling it tin. That should be clear by now.

“It’s so hard to...choose,” he said. “I don’t know...which one. Oh!”

The clerk patted his hand. She had dealt with Cumcut in the past. He was only a few years older than her recently college-graduated twenty-two, but she was a sympathetic soul to customers like Cumcut whose souls needed sympathy.

“I understand,” she said.

“I want the...number seventy-two so badly. But...the one-oh-three...Oh!”

“You can come back tomorrow,” the clerk said.

A tear came to Cumcut’s right eye. He had come every day for the last two weeks, since before school had even started. “I’ve got to...decide...sooner or later,” he said. He looked away from her. “Oh!” he groaned, so loudly that a pair of dowagers in the small leather goods aisle grasped one another’s hands in fear. “What will...I do?” he went on.

The clerk smiled at him. “Come back tomorrow,” she said. “I’ll be here, and the samples will still be here.”

He nodded. “We decide...tomorrow.” He smiled gamely. “Thank you...so much.”

And with that, Halefoil Cumcut turned and slowly, in miserable yet exquisite agony, walked away from the corner of Tiffany & Co. where he purchased his tournament trophies.

Things had none gone well at Manhattan Lodestone after the murder of Mr. Lo Pat, the director of forensics at the school for as long as anyone could remember. He had been in a wheelchair for many years, and while he was practically worshipped by his students and alums, there was obviously at least one person who had a different opinion of the man. Otherwise why would someone run him through on a hot summer night with a samurai sword stolen from a KutRateAntiques store on Madison Avenue while he was returning home from a quick grocery-shopping trip? Nothing had been

stolen as part of the crime. A couple of hundred dollars in cash, Mr. Lo Pat's wallet with its credit cards, and the small canvas bag containing a head of bok choy, a halibut and a box of Halibut Helper—they had all been left behind by the assailant.

The crime remained unsolved to this day.

Filling the shoes of the legendary debate god had, initially, proven virtually impossible. The job was obviously open and available—Mr. Lo Pat may have been a debate god, but he wasn't still coaching from the afterlife—but there were no takers. Not a single applicant came nosing around, studying the position. As a result, the administration of Lodestone (which, by the way, is a magnet school) had no choice but to assign the job to a series of hapless new and as yet untenured teachers who, if they wanted to achieve that miracle of tenure, would do what they were told to do. That they were incapable of handling, much less coaching, the army of forensicians that was the Lodestone team was beside the point. Manhattan Lodestone was a forensics powerhouse. The lack of a power source in the back of that house wasn't going to stop them.

And for three years, taking one apprentice teacher after another and convincing them that they'd be better off in a job that didn't have teaching, adolescents or forensics within a hundred miles of it, the team hit a new and miraculous competitive milestone. They had become the biggest team of its size to ever suck that badly. You could smell them all the way down in Baltimore and halfway up to Toronto.

Who are you hitting in round 2?

Somebody from Lodestone.

Pwn!

And then Halefoil Cumcut had come along.

Halefoil had been a debater himself not too long ago, not at all a high school star but certainly a dedicated member of the debate community. It was how he identified himself at his high school, the Pierre, South Dakota, High School Okobojo Annex, at which he had been one of three students. The other two were the Twining Twins (also known as the Twinning Twines) who, for the twelve years of their association with Cumcut in their never-exceeding-classes-of-three, had never once let five minutes go by without at least a mild act of torture when the teacher/monitor/parent/babysitter/waitress/stableboy/woodcutter/whatever was looking in the other direction. Cumcut had hated the Twining Twins, and the Twining Twins had hated Cumcut. That there was no other boy within five hundred miles, meaning that only one of the twins would be able to ultimately possess young Halefoil, may have played into their incestuous twelve-year drama. Although

it was, simply put, uncertain that young Halefoil would have ever chosen either of them. He was what you might call a confirmed bachelor. Whether it was the Twining Twins that had made him thus, or if he had always been that way, is a subject for fundamentalist religious leaders to address, and not us.

(If you're wondering, the Twining Twins went on to college at Northwestern, where they met Hans und Janni, the Schadenfreude brothers, and have not been heard from since.)

Halefoil Cumcut, on the other hand, after home-schooling himself through college, came to New York. Bright lights, as they say, Big City. And for some unknown reason, a desire to enter the education field. His parents, they of the unlimited funds, had only put enough money into the bank to last him a year, although in the manner of a Cumcut and not just any schmuck from Okobojo. In other words, he had been able to bring his valet, Mahatma, along with him. Still, if Halefoil didn't find work, it would be back to Okobojo and the Cumcut goldmine fortune. It wasn't that Halefoil held any animus against his family; it's just that Halefoil did not see himself as mining magnate. Neither did his family, for that matter. But scions are scions, and one seldom has a choice in them, unless one is, say, a Plantagenet, but that's another thing altogether.

At the beginning of his New York sojourn, Halefoil Cumcut judged debate rounds. And, before long, he began learning about various positions that were open, and began applying for them.

The position at Lodestone, of course, did not appeal to him.

There's a thousand kids on the Lodestone team, people would tell him. You'll just be babysitting, not debating. Or maybe, how is someone like you going to follow in the footsteps, or more accurately the wheelchair tracks, of a man like Mr. Lo Pat? One or two of his more snide acquaintances suggested that, if he got the job, he'd end up being run through with a samurai sword just like his predecessor, leaving nothing behind but a bag of groceries.

The position remained unappealing.

And then something clicked. While Halefoil was uncharacteristically sitting in a Dunkin' Donuts in Newark, New Jersey, because there was nowhere else to sit, the man who had once been the coach of Veil of Ignorance High School, Seth B. Obomash, who had left in disgrace but, over time, paid his debt to society and who was now the adult voice of forensics via his blog, Quack the Forensic Duck, happened to wander in. And they began to talk. And Seth B. Obomash explained it all to Halefoil Cumcut.

"This is it in a nutshell, Hale. Manhattan Lodestone is the biggest program in America. If you don't go for that job, you'll regret it. Maybe not

today, and maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life. If you take that job, you will influence not dozens of children, not hundreds, but thousands. You will take a program that is foundering and rebuild it as one of the leading programs in the country. You will take their miserable little Vaganza tournament that has so become extra and turn it back into the number one event of the season. Your name will live forever in those places wherever debate is spoken. You will, in a word, become a god.” Obomash paused. “Or else you’ll go back to Okobojo and be the number one Oko Bozo. Albeit a phenomenally rich one.” He put his hand on Cumcut’s shoulder. “I’m only looking out for your best interests here, Halefoil.”

And Halefoil Cumcut had been inspired. He had flown from Newark to Manhattan (via Path train) and stormed into Lodestone, demanding an interview. Unfortunately, it was a Saturday and the school was deserted, but after a bit more thought on his part, and after passing a rigorous hiring procedure (“You actually want the job?” the principal had asked him, “then hell, you got it!”) he had become the director of forensics at Manhattan Lodestone, a program of historic proportions.

As it turned out, he was the perfect person for the position. Although, if the truth were known, he did keep one eye open for people carrying samurai swords. I mean, one never knows, does one?

Does Tiffany really sell debate trophies?

Is Halefoil Cumcut really a secret millionaire? Or for that matter, is it really a secret?

Who is behind the mysterious murder of Mr. Lo Pat?

Do they really sell Halibut Helper?

Do you really want to know?

The answers, my friend, are not blowing in the wind of our next episode: “You Say Nee-ther and I say Nee-ther, or, ‘Thank you, Miss Le-Veen.’ ‘That’s Le-Vine.’”