



Episode 14

Don't Give Up Your Day Job

Amnea Nutmilk has a busy life, and it shows no signs of slowing down. She's always been successful -- more or less -- and she has no intentions of that slowing down either.

She stares out of the train window at the Hudson River. On the other side of the water the leaves are beginning to turn, occasional slashes of orange and gold threading the green of the New Jersey palisades. Hard to believe it's autumn already. Hard to believe she's been living in Stockwood for almost six months now.

She stops her mind from meandering and returns to her work. Amnea Nutmilk is seldom one to allow herself aimless meditations in the middle of the day when there's a job to do. And for Amnea Nutmilk, there is always a job to do.

Amnea is a magazine editor. The editor, actually, of the alternately notorious and legendary Metro New York. A combination of what's happening culturally, politically, spiritually, and whatever else Ms. Nutmilk considers interesting, MNY (as it has been familiarly known for over a generation) is one of the most powerful trend-setting and trend-spotting journals in the world. Which makes Ms. Nutmilk one of the most powerful trend-setters and trend-spotters -- a fact which she never forgets, and which she usually never lets anyone else forget either.

So how the hell did she end up trying to coach a high school debate team? Where no one cares in the least about MNY, if they've ever even heard of it?

It is, as the King of Siam might say, a puzzlement.

The work in Amnea Nutmilk's lap is a set of galleys for next week's fiction section. Of all the aspects of MNY, this is the only one which she feels less than interested in. She trusts her fiction editor, and therefore trusts that the weekly stories are worthy, but they seldom if ever hold her attention for more than a few paragraphs. They never seem to be about anything, and the only way you know they've ended is that you turn the page and they're not there anymore. But nonetheless she must work her way through them, occasionally

marking up something that bothers her as illiterate, illogical, or simply misplaced in an MNY. Inevitably her fiction editor explains away the bother and that's the end of it, but Ms. Nutmilk does not earn her enormous salary because she trusts her staff -- even her most trustworthy staff -- unconditionally. She'd fire any of them tomorrow if she thought it was a good idea, and no one would question it. It is an accepted part of her power, a power so vast that when she took this job, she was on the cover of Time magazine.

Debaters, apparently, or at least their coaches, never read Time magazine.

She lifts her eyes from the page again. She has not yet recovered from her "discussion" with that idiot Obomash. The nerve of that man. Who did he think he was, anyhow? And didn't he know who she was?

Apparently not.

She looks out the window again. The train is nearing the Stockwood station, another five minutes or so. She looks at her watch: 2:22. When was the last time she was out of the office on a weekday at 2:22? She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. She never thought she would ever move out of the city, but when her divorce became final she was struck by an irrational but irresistible urge to make a clean break with her old life. Not with her job, of course, but with the places that she and Manny had been a couple in together for twenty years. All of those places were New York places, and she had always harbored a mild affection for the country, so she packed up herself and Chesney and headed north, and left Manny the apartment and the city. Of course, it has been especially wrenching for Chesney, pulling him out of Manhattan Lodestone as she has, but she was convinced -- and still is -- that it will be for the best. In Manhattan Lodestone he was just one more genius. At Bisonette Technical, he is the genius. She will be shocked if he doesn't get into either Harvard or Yale or both. How much competition can Bisonette offer, and a bright light like Chesney will stand out considerably.

Oh yes, she has done the best thing possible for Chesney, although he doesn't think so. Chesney was not happy to leave his friends in the city, and less happy to leave his precious debating team. He had earned a place at the top, he claimed, and as a senior he'd be the A team, perhaps even captain. Amnea felt bad about that, so bad that she determined to make up for it. And now she is putting together a new team for Bisonette Technical.

When she talked to Val Lewton, the principal of Bisonette (pronounced "Bisonay"), he seemed singularly uninterested in the prospect. "A debate team costs money," he said, looking at her over the pompous reading glasses perched on the edge of his nose. "Money that the school system can barely afford."

"I'll pick up those costs myself," she suggested.

His eyebrows rose slightly.

"Within reason," she added. "And provided that Chesney is on the team."

"That is a generous offer, Mrs. Nutmilk."

"But not without self-interest."

"I couldn't let you assist the team unless you were unprejudiced against other team members. If you were only to support your son's endeavors..."

"That would not be the case, Mr. Lewton. I promise you that."

"Then why don't we give it a try?" he agreed.

And now, trying it she is. She is on her way to a team orientation meeting. Chesney has been feverishly recruiting for over a week, talking to all the students he could collar, visiting the honors classes, sending barrages of e-mails. Today she will see the fruit of his efforts, and she will explain forensics to the students and organize them into a team.

And then, of course, she will have to coach them. She will only do Lincoln-Douglas, because Chesney has explained LD to her, and one facet of the activity is enough, at least starting out. She cannot admit to any fondness for dead philosophers, but there is more than a little bit of a radical leftist flow in her bloodstream, and she can admit to being a member of the ACLU, so she is happy to argue with anyone about anything, although not necessarily on the proscribed terms of LD. But she can learn those. If Chesney can read John Locke, so can she. Hell, she's reading this stupid short story, isn't she?

As the train pulls into Stockwood station she returns the galleys to her briefcase. The air is warm and summer-like as she steps down on the platform, where she finds herself surrounded by an odd assortment of travelers unlike her usual commuting comrades. Fewer blank stares, fewer gray suits, slower steps out of the station. What do these people do during the day, she wonders, that they'd arrive in Stockwood at two thirty in the afternoon?

Then again, who cares?

She gets into her Volvo, opens the windows, and heads out to the school. It is only a five minute drive, but the cool air blowing in on her face is as refreshing as a walk in the park. The busy Ms. Nutmilk does not need long restoratives to get herself back to fighting trim. The editor of MNY does not get the luxury of much time to herself, so she has learned to use the time she does get wisely. She can turn herself on and off in an instant, a skill that helps insure her survival in a business where more than a few candidates would be happy to take over her job tomorrow, if it meant pushing her into a wood chipper to do it. Dog eat dog doesn't begin to describe it.

But enough of that, she thinks, as she pulls into the Bisonette Technical parking lot. She has another job now.

The students are just getting out of school as she is entering the building, and they seem a far cry from the students she saw last Saturday down in New Jersey. Those students were clean cut, dressed in suits and ties, looking like an army of little lawyers and lawyerettes. These students look like extras from a rap music video, albeit mostly white extras. The black population of Stockwood is depressingly small, and Amnea would prefer that Chesney be exposed to a more balanced group, but of course he did have all his life in Manhattan prior to the move to mingle with everyone from Sikhs to Shakers. The thought of that pompous Seth Obomash passes unbidden through her mind again. He probably now thinks she's a racist too, the idiot.

Grrrrrr!

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Nutmilk."

It is the principal, standing in front of a bulletin board, watching his charges make their daily exit from his care. There is a leering aspect to him that Amnea finds suspect, but whether it is directed at her or at the somewhat overripe teenage girls that are flowing past him is hard to determine. This time his reading glasses are perched on the top of his head, like the horns of a satyr.

"Good afternoon," Amnea replies.

"Your meeting is in room 253," he tells her. "Chesney is already there."

"Thank you," she says. She feels no inclination to waste time making small talk with him, so she heads off to the right to get to her room.

"Mrs. Nutmilk," the principal calls.

She stops and looks around.

"That way," he says, pointing in the opposite direction.

Undaunted, she realigns herself and heads the right way, eventually going up the stairs to the second floor, checking the room numbers--

To room 253. The door is open. She takes a deep breath, ready to face her prospective new team, and walks in.

There are two students in the room. One is Chesney. The other is a dark, unshaven, disheveled character hunched over a notebook in which he is sketching furiously.

"Where is everyone?" she asks in way of greeting her son.

"This is it," Chesney replies.

"This is it?"

"This is it." He indicates the swarthy sketcher. "That's Worm Padrewski. He's a sophomore."

"Worm?" Amnea whispers the word.

"Short for Warner," Worm says without looking up. "I'm used to it by now."

"Worm is the smartest kid in the sophomore class," Chesney says, somewhat defensively.

"Where's everyone else," Amnea asks.

"They didn't show up."

"Why?"

"I guess they just weren't interested."

Amnea pulls out the chair from the teacher's desk and sits down. This is not a pleasant prospect. One kid out of a school of over 500? This is the most interest that could be drummed up for a debate team? It's absurd. Maybe she should drop the whole idea and simply take Chesney to tournaments as an independent entry. But he has already dismissed that idea. He wants to be part of a team, he doesn't want to be seen as some sort of exile. And as a good debater, he wants to share his skills with others, as others have shared their skills with him.

All right, then. They'll be a team of two.

Suddenly there is the sound of activity out in the hall. Feet stamping, some words exchanged. Angry words from an adult. A girl's reply. Silence. Then the feet again. As Amnea Nutmilk watches, a file of seven students enters the room as if they are shackled together as a chain gang. The leader wears a backwards Yankee cap, a tight Megadeath T-shirt showing powerful muscles underneath, and seems to have parked the motorcycle he stole from Marlon Brando outside in the nearest no-parking zone. His entourage, five other males and one black-garbed female, give off the same Future Hells Angels Society essence. All he needs to complete the picture is a burning cigarette hanging from his lips.

"I'm Binko," he says, walking up to Amnea. "Lewton said we could get out of detention if we agreed to join the debating team." He holds his hands out, palms up. "So let's debate," he says. He looks over his shoulder. "Hiya, Chesney. Hiya --" he clears his throat-- "Wormsie."

One of his myrmidons chuckles behind him.

Amnea Nutmilk sits back in her chair and folds her arms. If that's what Lewton wants, that's what Lewton will get. Are all these school people the same? she wonders, thinking back to Seth B. Obomash.

"Sit down, Mr. Binko," she says. "And the rest of your seven samurai. We've got work to do."

And now, officially, Bisonette (pronounced "Bisonay") Technical has a Lincoln-Douglas Debate Society.

Will the seven samurai morph into forensic gods under Amnea Nutmilk's tender tutelage?

Will Principal Lewton consider switching to bifocals?

Will Amnea Nutmilk's publisher wonder where she's disappeared to in the middle of the afternoon?

Will Manny Nutmilk come crawling back to her?

Whatever happened to Janet Reno?

You'll never find out in our next installment: "Irving Berlin: Whither the Piccolino?"