



Episode 15

Personally, I Prefer Werewolves of London

Amnea Nutmilk's eyes pass over what, for lack of a better name, must be called the Bisonette Technical Debate Society. With the exception of her own flesh and blood, they are the sorriest lot she has ever seen.

Worm Padrewski, who did not strike her as a house afire when she first entered the room, has sunk even further into himself with the arrival of the seven samurai from the detention room. Apparently he already has more than a passing relationship at least with Binko -- what kind of name is Binko? she wonders -- and that relationship has not been a positive one. Worm has his face inches from the page on which he is sketching what looks to be, from this distance, a Star Wars montage.

Next to Worm is Chesney, looking nonplused by Binko's crew, although whether from ignorance or disinterest is hard for her to tell. He is sitting at one of the student desks spinning his pen around his fingers, waiting for her to begin the meeting.

The seven samurai are spread across the room from Chesney to the windows at the far side. As far as she can tell, and she's not used to teenagers, they range in age to cover the full breadth of the high school years, with Binko the oldest, suffering from a severe five o'clock shadow, although five o'clock of which day is probably up for grabs. He could be seventeen, twenty-two or twenty-seven, and she wouldn't be surprised at any of them. He is sitting next to Chesney, watching her son twirl his pen around.

"How do you do that?" he finally asks.

Chesney does it again in slow motion. "You hold the pen between your thumb and middle finger like this, then you just drop your index finger and spin." Thwipp! He does it again. Thwipp! And again. And again.

"Incredible," Binko says.

"Try it."

"I don't carry a pen as a general rule."

"Not even in school?"

Binko shrugs. "What the f--" He stops in mid phoneme and looks at Amnea. "What the hell for?" he corrects himself.

What a gentleman, she thinks.

Next to Binko is the girl. The word that would best describe her is undead, which is the cosmetic result of her apparent misperception of the "in" scene. Her hair, scattered across the top of her head and held in place with random pins, is dyed black, the worse dye job Amnea has ever seen, and she travels in the avant garde circles of Metro New York, where bad dye jobs are coin of the realm. The girl is wearing black eye makeup and black lipstick, both thicker than an Ozark ham steak, and complements the bloodless look of her cosmetics with a loose black T-shirt and skin-tight black jeans and, of course, semi-Victorian black bootlets that begin three inches after her jeans end. Amnea can't wait to see this one defending the affirmative side of, well, anything.

"And you are?" Amnea asks her.

"Gloria."

"Gloria what?"

"Yeah."

"`Yeah'?"

"Yeah. Gloria What. I like that."

The girl's voice is deep and rich. Amnea has to remind herself that she is unlikely ever to see the seven samurai again, so don't start thinking how they might be made into something they aren't. Like orators.

And with that thought in mind, Amnea turns to the remaining five and decides not to bother trying to sort them out. They return her glance with blank stares, which sums up the lot of them.

"How long is this going to take?" Binko asks.

"You have somewhere better to be, Mr. Binko?"

"Maybe."

"Like detention, maybe."

"Like, I didn't deserve detention, man."

"Then why were you there?"

"Lewton says I was smoking in the locker room."

"Were you?"

He shakes his head. "I ran out of cigarettes on the way to school this morning."

She reaches out and opens her purse, knocks a Marlboro from its pack and tosses it over to him.

"Here," she says. "Have one of mine."

He snorts and sticks the cigarette over his ear. "You can't buy me with cigarettes," he says nonchalantly.

"I'm not trying to buy you, Mr. Binko. I'm trying to kill you. It will be a long, slow death, but a death nonetheless."

"You smoke, right?"

"I've quit eleven times."

"I haven't even quit once yet."

"You will. Mark my words. Maybe more than once, if you're one of the lucky ones." She stands up. "Enough of this. Mr. Padrewski?"

Worm looks up. "Yes?"

"You with us?"

"Yes."

"You want to stop twirling the pen, Chesney?"

He sticks the pen in his pocket. He's been driving his mother mad with that trick for the last three years.

"So let's begin," she says. What we're talking about here is Lincoln-Douglas debate--"

"What?" one of the five leftovers asks.

She cuts him a look that usually sends her MNY staff into hyperventilation fits. The kid just looks back at her blankly. That's right, she remembers. If you can't fire them, your potency isn't exactly the same.

"Lincoln-Douglas debate," she repeats. "One opponent on each side. First you present your case, then you argue with your opponent."

"What do you argue about?" Binko asks.

"Different things," she replies.

"Usually philosophical issues," Chesney adds. "Like the rights of the individual versus the rights of society, that sort of thing."

"Why?"

"It's fun."

"It's fun?"

"Definitely. You get to exercise your brain, and if you're mostly smarter than everybody else you usually win, except for some people who win and nobody knows why because they're total assholes, if you know what I mean. Plus you get to--"

"Chesney!"

He shuts up.

"Thank you. As my son so clearly puts it, LD is fun, if you like that sort of thing. You get to travel to tournaments every week--"

"Where are the tournaments?" Binko asks.

"You would do well to just once allow me to finish a sentence, Mr. Binko."

"I'm an excitable boy," he replies.

"Poor, poor, pitiful me," she mutters. "To answer your question, the tournaments are in different places. They range for us all up and down the east coast, and maybe as far away as Chicago."

"How long do you go away for?"

"Two days usually. Sometimes three."

"Where do you stay?"

"Sometimes you get housed by the students that are hosting the tournament. Other times you stay at motels."

Binko exchanges a glance with Gloria. "Motels, huh?"

"Sometimes. Like we're staying at a motel this week when we go to Messerschmitt."

"What's Messerschmitt?"

"Messerschmitt College. In Florida."

"Florida?"

"Yeah."

"Hmmpf."

Hmmpf, indeed, Amnea thinks. "Are you actually interested in this, Mr. Binko?"

"I might be."

"Why is that?"

"Why not? You think I'm some sort of idiot, just because I get detention?"

"I didn't say that."

"You think Gloria is some sort of idiot, because she, like, gets caught making out behind the stage with her boyfriend?"

"Is that why you're in detention today?" Amnea asks the girl.

She shrugs. Shrugging seems to be a big detainee activity.

"You should dump that loser and go out with me," Binko says.

How romantic, Amnea thinks. Gloria says nothing.

Back to business. "We're going to have meetings twice a week," Amnea says. "One night, with me, and one afternoon, just among yourselves. With me, we'll work on the topics, among yourselves you'll have practice rounds after school."

"So you're like the coach?" Binko asks.

"Yes. I'm like the coach."

"How come?"

"Because no one else would take the job at this salary."

"How much are they paying you for this?"

Amnea is getting the urge for one of those cigarette, which means that this particular meeting has gone on long enough. "They pay me as much as they pay the team members," she answers. "The first meeting will be this Wednesday night at seven-thirty." She gives them the address. "You'll be there Mr. Padrewski?"

The boy nods. He isn't exactly a dynamo, but maybe he'll come out of his shell when Binko is no longer around.

"Good. I'll see you then."

"What about me, Mrs... Who are you, anyhow?"

"Mrs. Nutmilk. Chesney's mother."

"Mrs. Nutmilk." He pauses for a moment to absorb that. "Okay. Mrs. Nutmilk. What about me? And Gloria? And the guys?"

"You're all welcome to come, Mr. Binko. In fact, I look forward to seeing you."

"You're not going to take us to Florida with you though."

"I don't think you're quite ready for that, Mr. Binko."

"So we can go now, then," Binko asks, looking at his watch. It's a quarter past three.

"Sure," Amnea says.

"All right!" The seven samurai are on their feet and out the door, breaking speed records along the way.

"Regular detention doesn't get out until four o'clock," Chesney explains after they've disappeared.

"Ah." Amnea turns to Padrewski. "See you Wednesday?"

He nods.

"Worm'll be there," Chesney says. "Won't you, Worm?"

"I'll be there," Worm Padrewski says, finally uttering his first words since the meeting began.

And Amnea realizes he has a voice like a depressed turtle.

She grabs her purse and heads out the door. "Let's go," she calls to Chesney over her shoulder. She really needs that cigarette now.

And this is only her first day on the job.

Will Binko ever learn to twirl a pen?

Will Amnea and Binko give up nicotine together?

Will Gloria What?

Does anyone other than the French really understand the difference between the signifier, the signified and the sign?

Will Oprah ever go gaga over manga?

Such nonsense is avoided altogether in our next installment: "Soccer: International detente, or Brazilian émigré reunion?"