



Episode 17

In the Room, Forensics Come and Go

Tarnish Jutmoll knocks on Principal Walsh's door. There is no reply. He knocks again, louder this time. Still no reply.

"He's in there," one of the secretaries says, giving Jutmoll a conspiratorial smile over the top of her computer screen. "Give him a minute."

Jutmoll knows the drill. Raoul Walsh's door is always closed, and he's always alone, and it always takes him five minutes to answer a knock. Jutmoll dreads knowing what it is Walsh is doing in there by himself all the time.

The door swings open.

"Come in, Tarnish. Come in."

Bracing himself, Tarnish enters the inner sanctum.

Principal Walsh's office is a decent sized space, with both a desk and two visitors' chairs, plus a conversation corner with a couch and another three chairs and a small table with a pile of outdated Time magazines. The walls are lined with books, most of them, Jutmoll knows, recycled castoffs from the school library. Raoul Walsh hates to see anything go to waste, especially words, even if they're old and tired.

Walsh points Jutmoll to one of the chairs in front of his desk, and takes his own seat behind the desk. Walsh is a dry old man, his career at Nighten Day stretching back as long as Jutmoll's. They both know too much about each other. Walsh even looks a little like Jutmoll, white-haired, thin, but he has the remarkable characteristic of wearing a black eye patch, like a kid dressed up as a Halloween pirate. As far as Jutmoll knows, no one in real life has worn an eye patch -- except perhaps after an operation and only until it's healed -- since the Hathaway Shirt man. And the Hathaway Shirt man wasn't exactly real life.

"I'm glad you could see me, " Walsh begins. The expanse of desk in front of him is covered with paperwork. Most of his time is spent either justifying his budget to the school board, or justifying his teachers to the parents, or somehow justifying something to someone. Education has little to do with it.

"When the boss calls, Raoul..." Jutmoll crosses his legs, an involuntary act of self-protection. He knows something bad is about to happen.

"I guess it was a command performance." Walsh gives a thin smile. "You've got a meeting this afternoon?"

"I've got a meeting every afternoon, Raoul. Today it's the speech people."

Walsh nods. "Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about, Tarnish."

"You've found a speech coach? That'll be great, Raoul. I need an assistant--"

Walsh cuts him off. "I haven't gotten you an assistant, Tarnish."

"Since Myra left--" Jutmoll stops himself. He has not spoken her name in years, and it surprises him that he has done so now.

Walsh says nothing for a moment, allowing Jutmoll a second to compose himself. Then he says, slowly, "I have bad news, Tarnish."

"Bad news."

"About the team." He pushes a paper in front of Jutmoll. "That's the budget for the rest of the year."

Jutmoll stares at it blankly. "And?"

"I'm going to have to cut Speech and Debate."

Jutmoll's hand comes to his chest. Walsh is expressionless behind his eye patch.

"I'm speechless," Jutmoll finally says.

"And soon to be debateless," Walsh adds.

Jutmoll tries to shake away his shock. "Nighten Day has had forensics as long as there's been a Nighten Day," he says. "We can't just drop it, like that." He snaps his fingers.

Walsh shakes his head. "We have no choice, Tarnish. The estimates are that we're getting another hundred students into the high school next year, and another fifty the year after that. The spawn of the baby boomers, Tarnish. The baby boomlet, I guess they call it. And I've got to find room for them in this building, and I've got to find teachers for them--"

"And extracurricular activities!"

"And extracurricular activities. But you only have, what, about twenty, twenty-five kids? A very insignificant number, overall. I get a lot more participation in Mental Gymnastics, and it costs a lot less."

Jutmoll is holding on to the edge of his white goatee as he shakes his head. "Mental Gymnastics? All they do is play dumbed-down Jeopardy once a year down in the Bronx. That's not an activity, Raoul!"

"It's an activity to the parents, who like to see that participation on their kids' resumes. They think it gets them into colleges."

"Forensics looks a lot better than that to colleges than Mental Gymnastics."

"But forensics means work, and a small elite. Most kids don't want to do extra work -- not even the smart ones -- while Mental Gymnastics is for the masses who are capable of bulling themselves through."

"It's for the stupid masses, you mean."

"No one ever accuses the masses of blinding intelligence, Tarnish."

Jutmoll slumps back into his seat. "I guess not."

"I probably can support the team at least through the rest of this calendar year. If you keep it on the cheap, that is. No big travel, no planes, none of that sort of thing."

Jutmoll slumps down even further. "We're going down to Messerschmitt this weekend. It's too late to cancel."

"Oh." Walsh rubs his patched eye. "Well, we'd lose most of our money anyhow if we did. But this is it. For the rest of the year, buses. And cheap."

"You can only carry us through December?"

"I might do better than that. But it will be on a case-by-case basis."

"What about the Snow Ball?" The Snow Ball is Nighten Day's own annual tournament, run every January, usually in the middle of a snowstorm.

"It's hard to say, Tarnish. The team might not be in existence by then."

"But there's so much advance planning. So much work. I'll have to know."

"How long can you wait?"

He calculates everything that has to be done. "Thanksgiving, at the latest."

"I'll let you know by Thanksgiving."

"We bring in over two thousand dollars some years, Raoul."

"And most years you get canceled because of snowstorms, and you lose money. We can't afford that this year. We can afford it less than ever."

"If money is the only issue, what if the kids pitch in themselves to help support the team?"

Walsh shakes his head. "It wouldn't be fair. Some can afford it, some can't. The school can't pick up the tab for the ones who can't, and it wouldn't be right that they suffer just because their parents can't afford to send them to tournaments."

"Most of them can afford it, Raoul!" Jutmoll is thinking primarily of the Diamond family's fleet of sports cars.

"But not all of them. And as principal, I've got to think of all of them."

"Should I tell them?" Jutmoll asks.

"That's up to you, Tarnish. I wouldn't, if it were me. Then all you'd get is futile worrying and carrying on, while the team is still in existence. Better to make a clean break of it when the time comes, but not before."

Jutmoll suddenly remembers that this will affect more than just the team. "I assume this means my extra coach money is gone," he says, mentally going into his own wallet.

"Not at all. I've grandfathered that in as part of your salary. When the team goes, we'll be able to call that a retroactive raise. And you'll still be able to teach your elective class in Forensics. I'd never stop that."

"But that class isn't the team, Raoul. You know that. It's merely a time-filler for kids who can't get into Harry Klein's Cinema Appreciation Class. That's not what I'm all about. That's not what the team is all about." Jutmoll stands up. "I've been a debate coach for a long time, Raoul."

"And one of the great ones, Tarnish. Don't think that I don't know that. I hate to do this."

"But you have no choice."

Walsh looks up, his one eye expressionless. "I have no choice."

Jutmoll nods. "Thanks, Raoul."

There's nothing else to be said, and Jutmoll walks out the door, closing it behind him.

And that's how the world ends, Jutmoll thinks. Not with a bang, but with a boomlet. A baby boomlet.

"Are you all right, Tarnish?" he is asked by Ms. Mooney, the freshman English teacher with the prosthetic left arm.

Jutmoll nods. "Yeah. Fine. How are you?"

"Freshmen!" She grits her teeth. "Some of them have never read a poem in their life. Fifty percent of them think Walt Whitman is a mall, forty percent think he's a rest stop on the Jersey Turnpike, and the other ten percent think he's a brand of candy."

"It was always so, Margery."

"But it's getting worse." She shakes her head as she walks toward the coffee machine, and Jutmoll exits out of the Administration Office into the hallway.

School is over for the day, but the building is not yet empty of students. Most of them are home, but the afterschoolites are still around, pursuing their extracurricular activities. The jocks are on the field or in one of the gyms, the orchestra is in the auditorium singing -- Jutmoll pauses -- something what sounds mysteriously like an Indian raga string rendition of a Hootie and the Blowfish tune. Jutmoll shivers and moves on, undecided which he hates worse, the orchestra's inability to synchronize its strings to within three tones of each other or Hootie and the Blowfish. Must be the Christmas concert, he thinks. Hootie will displease all religions equally, which is what education is about at Nighten Day, isn't it?

Mental Gymnastics. Grrrrrrrr!

And now the bitterness begins, as he crabs his way around a corner toward the Speech and Debate room, which is also his regular classroom. One class a day in Debate, whence he's been able to pull a few potential team members but mostly where kids sit around and argue aimlessly while he vainly attempts to introduce them to the tools of logic. Three other classes in Social Studies, where at least some of the kids have to pay attention and perhaps learn something because they might have to take a Regents exam. Occasionally a student still comes along who responds to the joy of learning, and Jutmoll responds accordingly with his age-old love of learning rising once more from the ashes so that he can share ideas with a fellow human being, and perhaps affect a life. But that's rare. That's not where he makes his real connection as a teacher, and it hasn't been for more years than he can recall. No, his real connection has been with his debaters, the kids who choose to use their brains to control their lives, who have no fear of intelligence, whose greatest pleasure is the interplay of ideas, whose greatest satisfaction is out-thinking their intellectual equals on the playing field of a debate tournament. And now he has to give that up, because the damned school is running out of money?

Damn it!

His hand grabs the doorknob of his classroom. He stops.

No, he thinks. He can't go in like this. Anger is not the answer. The kids will read his mind in a second, and then he'll tell them, and he doesn't know if he wants to do that. He'll have to think that through.

Besides, it's not over yet. There is still money in the budget, and maybe the Snow Ball, and other tournaments to go to. Tomorrow, for instance, he's taking a group down to Florida for the Messerschmitt, one of the first big anything-goes tournaments of the year. Some coaches that he only sees once or twice a season will be there, and he'll have a chance to catch up and share notes. The Florida teams will be out in force, and they're a powerful conglomerate of debaters who seldom make it up to the Northeast. And there's speech and debate both, with people running around in all directions, and the concomitant excitement that goes with so much energy pointed towards intellectual achievement through competition. And the crabcakes at Joe and Rose's -- he's never been to Messerschmitt without dragging his team to Joe and Rose's for the crabcakes.

So Jutmoll makes a firm decision. He's not going to let the impending doom of losing his team spoil the enjoyment of what's left. He's not going to spoil it for himself, or for his team. He owes all of them, including himself, that much. If this is his last year, he will not go out with a boomlet. No, he will go out with a bang.

Because, damn it, what else can he do?

Will Nighten Day High School have to give up its Speech and Debate team?

Will Tarnish Jutmoll end up coaching the Nighten Day bowling team?

Will the Nighten Day Snow Ball suffer premature meltdown?

Will George Bush veto stem-cell same-sex flag burning?

Will next year's English A.P. exam be devoted to the Social Contract?

All this and more will be ignored in our next installment: "Chapstick: Does it exist in nature?"