



Episode 35

A Most Excellent See, Your Excellency

Sunday. The day off, the day of rest.

Sunday. The day to wake up late, to go to church if that's your thing, to pick up a newspaper the size of Topeka and laze around reading reviews of unreleased Finnish motion pictures while daintily holding a cream-cheese-smearred onion bagel between the thumb and forefinger of your right with the pinkie held out straight. Tres gallant. Maybe watch a football game, this time of year, or play a little golf if it's still warm enough, or maybe visit the relatives and eat a big lunchtime meal of someone's notorious pot roast and gravy and mashed potatoes and parkerhouse rolls and sit around afterward half asleep in comfy chairs with your belly bursting the top button of your pants but still finding plenty of room for Aunt Betty's infamous apple pie with, all right, just a little ice cream, just a tiny scoop, what do you mean vanilla, don't you have any chocolate, followed by the traditional argument about which flavor is the one and only correct expression of a la mode.

Sunday. All play and no work, mostly, except maybe for kids who put off their homework until the last couple of hours after the sun sets, and what kid worth the name doesn't?

Sunday. When the clock slows down from its normal, workaday speed, and each casual click of the pendulum is a hollow echo reflecting the depth of eternity.

Sunday. Peaceful. Easy.

The day off.

The day of rest....

Unless, of course, you're a Roman Catholic priest. Actually, make that a monsignor. To zero in even further, make that monsignor the principal of Veil of Ignorance High School.

In other words, if you're the Reverend Monsignor Harold Lloyd, your Sunday is -- if you'll pardon the expression -- going to be hell. Complete with hand basket.

The clergy at Veil of Ignorance, representing about a quarter of the teaching and administrative staff, have a variety of affiliations among different parishes. As principal, Monsignor Lloyd has the choice situation of living next door to the high school in the rectory of the Veil of Ignorance church, which serves its own lively parish of which the school is only an incidental part. The church has its own monsignor to handle parish affairs, which relieves Monsignor Lloyd of any clerical responsibilities other than those of his orders, which boils down to saying mass once a day. On school days, somewhere around six-thirty he usually runs through a quickie at one of the side altars in about twenty minutes, often alone but occasionally with an audience of one or two of the faithful who for their own reasons have drifted into the church at an odd moment. On Sundays he is grandfathered in for six a.m. mass, which is slightly more formal but draws a crowd that expects -- and gets -- a minimal sermon.

This particular morning, the sermon was even less than minimal: he skipped it completely, and he doubted if anyone was going to complain about it. He couldn't get his mind around the usual homilies of goodness and morality. Today, he had other things on his mind.

Like Seth B. Obomash. And the bishop, Monsignor Lloyd's boss, who had summoned him to appear at the diocesan offices at exactly eleven o'clock.

It is now exactly eleven o'clock.

And Monsignor Lloyd is entering the door of the diocesan building.

Mrs. Douglas is sitting at the reception desk, where, by Monsignor Lloyd's reckoning, she has sat for the last eighty-three years without even a bathroom break. She is a motherly little woman who was no doubt born a motherly little woman, and as far as Monsignor Lloyd, who is forty-nine, is concerned, she is old enough to be his grandmother, maybe even his grandmother's grandmother.

"Good afternoon, Monsignor," she greets him, her face expressionless. "His Excellency is expecting you. I'll tell him you're here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Douglas." He stands in front of her desk, momentarily wondering about the apparently mythical Mr. Douglas as she speaks into the telephone.

"Go right in," she says, hanging up.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

He hasn't spoken this many mindless courtesies since he was ten years old.

He opens the door to the Most Reverend Harold Warner's office and walks in. The bishop is sitting behind his desk, another expressionless face.

"Your excellency."

"Monsignor." The bishop raises a hand and indicates a chair next to the desk. Monsignor Lloyd sits.

For a minute the bishop says nothing. He is probably only a year or two older than Monsignor Lloyd, and he is a big, strong, athletic man. His bald head is tanned and rugged looking. Unlike the Monsignor, the bishop is not wearing a black suit and collar; he is dressed in a golf shirt and chinos. The bishop is well-known as a scratch golfer, playing gratis at clubs throughout the diocese as the guest of prominent Catholics or prominent business people of undetermined faith who would like to make a few deals with prominent Catholics, or occasionally with one or two comparable scratch golfers who enjoy a match at five dollars a hole, including greenies, when they have the chance of going home and telling their lovely wives that they whupped the bishop's ass again.

"The Cardinal is not happy," the bishop says finally.

The big gun himself. The Cardinal. Monsignor Lloyd takes a deep breath.

"I am not happy either," the bishop continues. "It is bad enough that one of our teachers is arrested for soliciting prostitutes--"

"At least he was a lay teacher," the monsignor interrupts.

"Is that a pun?"

There is a moment of silence as Monsignor Lloyd considers his word.

"I mean," he begins again, "at least it wasn't one of our priests."

"Our priests?" The bishop rolls his eyes. "One of your priests, Monsignor; not one of mine. And God knows what your priests are up to. As I was saying, it's bad enough to be arrested, but to be arrested while he was officially chaperoning our students on a trip out of state... You understand the seriousness of this?"

"I do."

"And what have you done about it?"

"I'm going to suspend him, of course."

"Going to? You haven't already done so?"

"I haven't been able to get in touch with him. He isn't answering his telephone."

"Assuming he's home. Maybe he's out with another one of his girlfriends, if that's what you call them."

The Monsignor squirms in his seat. He is used to making others squirm, either his students or occasionally his faculty. He is not used to being of the other side of the squirmation.

"You're going to have to do better than just trying to get in touch with him. And suspension won't even begin to scratch the surface."

"I don't think we can bring back the Inquisition," the Monsignor says.

"We can come close." There is a folded piece of paper on his desk. He opens it and straightens it in front of him. "The man is fired. Period. That's number one."

"If he resists?"

"Let him. He can try to sue us. He'd lose. Second, you're going to have to face the parents. We've gotten calls; I assume you have too."

The monsignor nods.

"Call a meeting. An open house. This week. Talk to them. Tell them what you're doing."

The monsignor nods again.

"Third, you will replace the man. Immediately."

"That's not going to be so easy." He pauses. "Most teachers won't touch debate with a ten foot pole."

"Why not?"

"They travel on weekends. They end up living with the kids virtually every day of their lives."

"Don't you pay them extra for it?"

"A bit. But not enough to convince them to actually do it."

"Then double it." The bishop hesitates. "How much exactly do you pay them?"

"Five thousand a year."

"Make it ten." He considers for a minute. "No. Seven. Let's not be too hasty."

"I could force a priest to do it. He might lose his soul, but at least we'd have a coach."

"No. That's fourth. I should have said this earlier. Make the coach a woman."

"I don't have any women on the staff that would come close to this activity."

"Then get one on the staff. Women don't go off with streetwalkers." He narrows his eyes. "Make it a nun, if you can't find a lay person."

"You know we don't have any nuns, Jack."

"Monsignor!" The word is icy, in response to the untoward familiarity Monsignor Lloyd has used. When Lloyd is not in the hot seat, he and the bishop are good friends, first names all the way. But not today, in the light of the Obomash incident. "I'll find you some nuns myself, if I have to."

"Whatever happens won't be easy."

"I don't care. You will fire the man, replace him with a woman, preferably one of impeccable and demonstrable innocence, and you will formally apologize to the parents and explain your plans to them."

"I have a big what-if, Your Excellency."

"What if what?"

"What if I can't find a woman of impeccable and demonstrable innocence?"

"Then terminate the team."

"You mean kill them?"

"I mean disband it. This is not funny, Monsignor."

"It is funny, Jack -- I mean, Your Excellency. You'd know what I mean if you'd ever met Seth B. Obomash."

"He's an African-American, isn't he?"

"That wasn't what I meant."

"I know that. I'm not accusing you of racism. But I'm sure there are those out there who will. So what is it about the man that makes this funny to you?"

"It's just that he's such a blowhard, always talking about his romantic conquests."

"Not to you, I hope."

"Of course not. But the gossip travels. You know that. Anyhow, it turns out that Veil of Ignorance's great Lothario turns out to be, well, a worse loser than we thought."

"The humor of that eludes me, Monsignor. You know, there is a fifth problem here."

"What's that?"

"The students. You're going to have a lot of explaining to do to them."

"Maybe no explanation would be a better strategy. I couldn't exactly explain it, to tell you the truth, because I barely understand it myself, and I certainly can't justify it. Besides, kids don't usually listen to priests about sexual matters anyhow."

"That's a fact, isn't it?"

The two celibates face each other, suddenly sharing a sympathetic moment.

"Be careful with this one, Harold," the bishop says, suddenly a friend again, rather than a superior. "The Cardinal wants this to go away as quickly as possible. It's not the worst scandal we've ever had, but we don't need any scandals of any sort, period. Especially sexual."

"I'll do my best, Your Excellency. Jack."

The bishop looks at his watch. "I've got a golf game in half an hour."

The Monsignor gets the message. He stands up. There is a moment of hesitancy, and then he offers his hand across the desk. The bishop stretches out his own, and they shake hands.

It isn't easy for priests to deal with matters like these. But they do their best.

As the Monsignor leaves the room, he begins to grapple with the question of finding a woman of impeccable and demonstrable innocence.

Will Monsignor Lloyd find a woman of impeccable and demonstrable innocence?

Does there even exist a woman of impeccable and demonstrable innocence?

Did anyone notice how, unlike Melville, we were able to forego the bishopric jokes?

How about them Knicks?

Does anybody still think Condi Rice will last out this administration?

Seek and ye shall not find the answers to these questions in our next episode: "Zucchini: Will it never end?"