



## Episode 42

### Paradise by the Dashboard Light

This is not going to be easy, Amnea Nutmilk thinks as she scrambles around the kitchen, cleaning up after dinner. First, there was leaving work earlier than usual, although no one really pays attention to her whereabouts: one of the perks of being the boss and having a reputation as a superhuman dynamo is that people naturally assume that when you're not directly in their view you're off somewhere superhumanly dynamoing. Her underlings at Metro New York magazine would never assume that she has ducked out of the office in order to coach her son's debate team. She wouldn't assume it herself if she wasn't here now, stuffing the remains of their microwaved macaroni and cheese dinners into the garbage can.

Frozen macaroni and cheese. As she scrapes the coagulating orange cement off a plate, she has to wonder how she has sunk so low. Amnea Nutmilk, possessor of a regular Tuesday lunch table at the Four Seasons restaurant, reduced to dining on a Stouffer's extra-large frozen dinner...

She has no choice but to light a cigarette. The alternative -- facing reality -- is too bleak.

There is the sound of a car's tires scraping on the gravel of the driveway. A moment later someone is fighting unsuccessfully with the front door.

"I thought you were going to unlock it," Amnea says to Chesney, who is still sitting in the dining room, morosely pondering the remains of his salad. At least they had salad. Amnea hasn't given up on normal food completely. At least not yet.

"I did."

"Well, go let him in before he starts using his teeth."

Chesney jumps up, drops his half-eaten salad on the kitchen counter for his mother to contend with, and clambers down the stairs to the door. "It's open," he calls out, a taunt to the poor soul on the other side who continues to ineffectively rattle the doorknob.

From the kitchen Amnea hears her son giving explicit directions to Worm Padrewski on how to operate their front door. There is a trick to it: you have to pull and push simultaneously, and until you've done it a few times, you can stand outside like an idiot until the passenger pigeon re-evolves and never get inside. Finally the two boys come up the stairs, Chesney talking about some class business, Worm merely grunting in reply.

Amnea had forgotten how uncommunicative Warner Padrewski is.

It is going to be a long meeting.

The living room of the Nutmilk establishment is large, with a fireplace at one end of the room, high wooden ceilings, and a big window overlooking the now dark backyard. There is a handful of furniture scattered around, mission style pieces Amnea has collected over the years. And in all the available nooks and crannies, and even in some of the unavailable ones, there are books. Books everywhere, some neatly organized, some stacked on the floor in front of the neatly organized, some scattered on any available flat surface and the hell with neat organization. The Nutmilks live in a world of books, both the explanation and the result of Amnea's occupation as an editor, as well as the explanation and the result of her son's preoccupation with the written word.

When Amnea enters the living room, having finished cleaning up the debris of her second-rate dinner, Worm Padrewski is tucked into a corner of the couch looking as if he's afraid of touching anything, and Chesney is sprawled on the big Morris chair, his feet extended out in front of him, blank legal pad at the ready. They both turn to her.

If she has ever questioned the reality of her position as coach, that question is now answered.

"Hello, Warner," she greets her guest.

"Hello, Mrs. Nutmilk." Again the voice of the depressed turtle. She is going to make him into an orator?

"It's good to see you again," she says, sitting on one of the straight chairs at the table by the window. "With a school as big as Bisonette I'd hoped we'd have more students get interested in debate, but--"

The roar of an engine drowns out her words. It sounds as if it is in her head trying to get out, but she realizes it is coming from the driveway, mixed as it is with the sound of gravel.

"What the hell is that?" she asks.

The engine seems to die down, but there is suddenly one last roar before it is cut off completely. Chesney is up, looking out the side window next to the fireplace.

"Well I'll be damned..."

"What is it, Chesney?"

"It's a motorcycle."

"I figured that out all by myself." She shakes her head. "I wasn't expecting that Meat Loaf would be coming to our meeting tonight."

"Not quite Meat Loaf, but close enough. Remember Binko? From detention?"

"The juvenile delinquent?"

"One and the same."

"You're kidding!"

"And his moll, or mama, or whatever they call them these days."

"That girl, what was her name? Gloria!"

"Gloria Fudless."

"Gloria Fudless? She told me her name was Gloria What."

"Anything is better than Gloria Fudless."

Once again there is the sesame of opening the Nutmilk's door, resulting in another trip by Chesney downstairs to give specific instructions. A moment later Chesney reappears at the top of the stairs. Behind him are Binko and Gloria Fudless, nee What.

"Hello Mrs. Milknut," Binko says, extending his right arm, which is holding his motorcycle helmet, and taking an exaggeratedly courtly bow. Gloria stands stiffly beside him, black hair, black makeup, black clothes -- a teenaged Elvira.

"It's Nutmilk," Amnea replies.

"Whatever." He looks over at the couch. "Hello, Worm. How's the family?"

Worm Padrewski silently tries to sink further into the couch.

"Is the meeting still happening?" Binko asks.

"We were just starting," Amnea tells him.

"So let the games begin."

Binko drops down into an armchair next to the couch. He is wearing black jeans and a plain red tee shirt under a leather motorcycle jacket. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out from somewhere.

"You don't mind if I smoke, do you, Mrs. M?"

Amnea finds her own pack of Marlboros. "Not bloody likely," she replies softly. "And that's Mrs. N to you."

The two of them light up, and stare at each other across the room. Despite his appearance as a West Side Story extra, Binko's expression is friendly, even warm.

"You know, Mr. Binko, when you showed up at the school last week during detention, it was mildly amusing, even to me. But I think showing up here tonight might be carrying the joke a bit too far."

"Who's joking?" he asks. He tips the ash from his cigarette. "This is a great place you've got, Mrs. M. Plenty of ashtrays everywhere." He turns to Gloria, who is still standing at the top of the stairs. "Why don't you park it somewhere?" he asks her.

"Are you trying to tell me you seriously wish to join the debate team?" Amnea asks.

"Why not?"

"Let's keep it simple. First you tell me why."

"No problem. Someday I'll want to get a major job for some heartless corporation, maybe as a lawyer, and make like a couple of hundred thousand a year before the two hundred percent bonus, but to get to that point first I'll have to graduate high school and go to college, and my bet is that having debate on my resume will not be a bad idea."

"How old are you, Mr. Binko?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, I'm wondering if it isn't a little late in your career to be worrying about your high school resume."

"I'm a sophomore. I'm sixteen."

Amnea says nothing. He looks twice that age.

"I stayed back kindergarten," he goes on. "That was all the rage back then. They wanted me to develop more fully; I was young for my age." He puts out his cigarette. "I'm not anymore. Young for my age, I mean."

"I would agree with that." Amnea looks up at Gloria. "And you, young lady?"

"I'm fifteen," she says, not meeting Amnea's eyes. "I'm a sophomore too."

"What I meant to ask was if you are serious about joining the debate team."

The girl shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe. If it gets me out of the house and all."

"It's none of my business," Amnea says, "but am I correct in assuming that the two of you are an item?"

Binko laughs. "Me and Gloria? Are you kidding? I mean, we go back a long way, but we don't go back there."

Amnea stops to think. There is every indication that these two really are serious about joining the debate team. They may not look like debaters; for that matter, Gloria barely looks as if she's breathing, and Binko looks as if he's eaten a couple of unborn babies for breakfast and can't wait to wash it down with the blood of a rogue schizophrenic. But they do sound serious...

All right. Why not?

"So let us begin," Amnea says. "And the name is Nutmilk, not Milknut. Do we understand each other, Mr. Binko?"

"Not quite, Mrs. N." He gives a small salaam to acknowledge the correct initial. "Names are a two way street. Mine is Jon Marcellus."

"Jon Marcellus? Where do you get Binko from that?"

"Where do you get Beaver from Theodore?" he asks with a shrug.

Realizing that this will be the end of his explanation, Amnea unfolds her notes.

"All right," she says. "Welcome to debate 101."

Jonathan Marcellus, alias BInko, is apparently incapable of sitting up straight. Perhaps the reason is a physical disability. Perhaps it's a religious thing. He is sprawled across Amnea Nutmilk's blue easy chair, his legs over the arm, staring at her.

She continues. "I thought I'd begin by explaining the parts of a debate round."

"Good start."

"Will you be providing a running commentary of the meeting throughout the evening, Mr. Marcellus?"

"Binko, please."

"All right. Binko?"

"You're politely asking me to shut up, but with a small measure of sarcasm?"

"Good read."

"Message received."

"Excellent. Okay. First of all, at any given tournament you have to debate both the affirmative and the negative of the resolution."

"What if you only agree with one side?" Binko asks.

"Well," Amnea says, "at least you allowed me three sentences in a row, even if two of them were one-words. It doesn't matter, Mr. Binko, what your personal opinion is about a debate resolution. What you are supposed to be doing is learning the art of rhetoric; that requires the ability to argue both sides of an issue."

"Still, if you prefer one side to the other, you'll always argue that side better."

Amnea turns to her son. He is an experienced debater, and Binko's question is not unreasonable. "Chesney?"

Chesney Nutmilk, legs extended again on the footrest of the big Morris chair, nods his head. "You would think so," he says, "but it doesn't work out that way. First of all, half of these resolutions are so philosophic that you don't have any personal opinion. But even if you do, that doesn't necessarily mean that you'll prefer arguing that side of the resolution. Sometimes you'll just write a case for the neg or that aff that you think is really good, and you just like arguing it, regardless which side it is."

"What's the resolution we're arguing now?" Gloria Fudless asks.

Fudless, Amnea thinks. Sounds like she's lacking a Fud.

"Resolved: Animal testing is immoral." Chesney is twirling his pen across the fingers of his right hand. Thwipp. Thwipp. Thwipp.

"Whoa!" Binko says. "I definitely have opinions on that subject."

"So do I," Gloria says.

"Doesn't matter," Amnea tells them. "You've still got to argue both sides of the resolution. We'll discuss the resolution itself later. For the time being, let's stick to the parts of the debate round. Now the first speech is the affirmative constructive." She looks down at her notes. "The affirmative has six minutes to make a case."

"Sounds like a long time," Binko says.

"It isn't," Chesney tells him. "You've got a lot of work to do in that six minutes."

"Right," Amnea says. "First, you start off with a quote."

"Why?"

Amnea blinks. Why indeed?

"It sort of sets the stage for what you're going to say," Chesney says. "It also gives you a chance to get warmed up, to make sure you've got the judge's attention."

"Where do you get the quotes from?"

"Quote books. Regular books."

"It doesn't hurt to do research," Amnea says. "There's always books and articles about a topic. Reading up on a subject is not a bad idea. You might end up knowing what you're talking about."

Binko nods.

"Anyhow," Amnea goes on, "the affirmative then goes on to provide definitions of the terms in the resolution."

"What kind of definitions?"

"Fair ones, that both sides can use?"

"Resolved: Animal testing is immoral.' You have to define what? Animals? Testing? Is?"

"You might define animal testing as one concept," Chesney says "But the big thing to define there might be the word immoral."

"Morality. Right and wrong. Big deal."

"It should be so simple."

"We'll discuss morality later," Amnea says. "Let's stick to the round. After the definitions, you have to present your value."

"What's the value?"

"Lincoln-Douglas is value debate. You're debating whether, in this case, animal testing is right or wrong, and you're going to ask the judge to make his decision on the basis of your value. That is, why is it right or wrong?"

"One value you might want to achieve is justice," Chesney says. "That's always a chestnut. People use it all the time. You might do something as simple here as morality. Or progress."

"The thing is," Amnea says, "values are big ideas, big philosophic concepts. Your case will present the specifics that support that big philosophic concept."

Binko is rolling his eyes. "I don't get it."

Chesney shrugs. "You will eventually. Stick to justice for the time being."

"The main part of your case is your contentions," Amnea continues. "This is the reasons that support your side, presented in a logical manner, that convince the judge to vote affirmative. Affirmatives have two, maybe three contentions. When you're finished, then it's time for cross-examination." She looks over at Worm Padrewski. He is sitting next to Gloria Fudless on the couch, and his body language indicates that he in dreadful fear that she is emitting Ebola virus. "Are you following this, Warner?"

He jumps a little. "Yes," he says so softly Amnea can barely hear him.

"Cross-X is cool," Chesney says. "It's the only time in the round when you actually get up and confront your opponent face to face." He hesitates. "Sort of."

"What do you mean, sort of?" Binko asks.

"Well, actually you stand there facing the judge, but it's still a confrontation."

"That lasts three minutes," Amnea says. "Then everybody sits down and takes a little prep time."



"Usually you have four minutes prep," Chesney says. "Sometimes three, sometimes five."

"The negative takes half their prep time now," Amnea says, "the jumps up and does their constructive. It's the same as the affirmative, to begin with. They have a quote, they present definitions if for some reason their definitions disagree with the aff, then they present their value, then they have usually two contentions."

"Same old same old," Binko says.

"But neg has seven minutes," Chesney says. "The first three or four are the neg case, then you go point by point refuting what the affirmative said."

"Then it's not fair," Binko says. "Aff had six minutes, neg has seven, but in that seven neg has to do twice as much."

"It gets weirder," Chesney says, warming to his topic. "After neg there's another three minutes of cross-X, this time by the aff, and some prep time, and then there's the first affirmative rebuttal. This is four minutes, and the aff now has to refute both the negative case and what the negative said about the affirmative case. After that, negative has six minutes to refute what the aff just said, and finally aff gets the last word, three minutes of two A.R."

"Two A.R.?" Gloria asks.

"Second affirmative rebuttal."

"No. It's not fair," Binko says. "It's all imbalanced."

"It adds up to thirteen minutes both sides. So it's fair in the end."

"You could have fooled me." Binko is shaking his head.

"You really expect us to do this on Saturday?" Worm asks. It's the longest sentence Amnea has so far heard him utter.

"You've got to start somewhere," Amnea says. "There's a Northeastern League tournament at Toulouse-Lautrec for novices and junior varsity this weekend. The perfect start."

"I haven't written any cases yet."

"You have two days," Chesney tells him. "Start when you get home tonight."

"On the animal-testing topic?"

"That's the one."

Worm looks nonplused. Amnea turns to her other team members. "Would you like to debate, Mr. Marcellus? Miss Fudless?"

Binko and Gloria exchange a glance that ends in a shrug.

"What the f---" Binko begins. He catches himself. "What the hell? Why not? You've got to be in it to win it, right?"

"You do indeed."

"So are we going to talk about the topic?"

Amnea looks at her watch. Eight o'clock. They have an hour to dispose of the morality of animal testing.

"Animal testing it is, Mr. Binko."

She pulls out another cigarette, and so does he.

"Let's do it, Mrs. N."

And as they light their Marlboros, Amnea begins to believe that Jonathan Marcellus and Gloria Fudless are indeed serious about debating.

Whoda thunkit? as they used to say.

Or welcome to the Bahamas, as Chesney has begun saying.

Whatever the hell that means.

**Will Binko and Gloria stick with debate?**

**Is it really only thirteen minutes a side?**

**Will Amnea keep her job at Metro New York?**

**Is it always rerun season?**

**Is it necessary to have mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, stuffing *and* Parkerhouse rolls for Thanksgiving dinner?**

**Tak your chances finding the answers in our next episode: "Spaghetti: Italian treat or Chinese puzzle?"**