



Episode 47

In the Heart of the Hibernian Metropolis

TO EVERY GENERAL AN ARMY

Stately, plump Amnea Nutmilk steps down off the school bus into the rain, quickly unfurls her umbrella, then stands aside under its protection as her team comes down and hustles its way into Toulouse-Lautrec High School.

Her team. It is hard to believe.

There are only four of them, and she seriously doubts if the three other than her son will survive their first exposure to actual debate. One of them is preternaturally shy, and one of them probably already has a juvenile criminal record, and one of them probably turns tricks at night, but... Well, they are her team.

She has done it.

She has brought Bisonette Technical into the realm of forensics, beyond just the participation of Chesney. She wouldn't have minded shepherding only Chesney from tournament to tournament, but she is used to managing groups. She manages the entire editorial staff of Metro New York magazine, and nearly every dealing she has in life involves groups. So too should debate involve a group.

The Bisonette Technical Debate Team.

Coach Amnea Nutmilk in command.

THE FACE IS FAMILIAR

Northeastern Debate League tournaments are informal affairs, with people signing up as they arrive, for three rounds each of policy and LD at the novice and junior varsity level. The NDLS fill the gaps between the major tournaments, and also provide an excellent growth arena for the newbies.

Tarnish Jutmoll is standing behind the desk in the office, signing teams up for the tournament. Toulouse coach Dan Ryan and Farnsworth coach Haj L. Sworn sit behind him, entering data into their matching Macintosh Powerbook computers.

When Amnea Nutmilk enters the office, it takes a moment for Jutmoll to recognize her. Her wild, curly hair is damp from the rain, and even wilder and curlier than usual. She is as solid a woman as he recalls her, but she seems a bit younger today, and even, in an odd way, a little attractive.

Jutmoll is surprised at himself. He usually doesn't find himself thinking about the charms of fellow debate coaches. They don't usually have any charms to bother thinking about.

"You're Chesney's mother," he greets her.

She smiles, surprised that she has been not only recognized but acknowledged. "Yes," she says. "And you are..."

"Tarnish Jutmoll. From Nighten Day."

"Oh, yes."

"You have a team to register?" he asks her.

"Oh, yes," she says proudly. "Three debaters from Bisonette Technical. All novices. Warner Padrewski, Jon Marcellus and Gloria Fudless. Chesney and I will act as judges."

Jutmoll writes down the information. "Excellent," he says as he does so. "Excellent."

WHAT A DUMP!

"It's like school, only worse," Binko says, throwing his backpack onto a table in the cafeteria and sitting down. "Every nerd in America, together again for the first time."

"They're not all nerds," Chesney says.

"All right," Binko says. "They're not nerds. They just play one on TV."

"You didn't have to sign up for debate."

Binko nods. "I needed the credential. But I thought there would be at least some cool people."

"There are. Be patient."

"Patient I can be. But don't expect Job here."

Binko, aka Jon Marcellus, is wearing a surprisingly well-fitted outfit of dark blazer and gray pants, looking as elegant as a debater as he looked dangerous as a motorcyclist. Beside him Worm Padrewski sits quietly with his shoulders hunched, as if he's readying himself for a firing squad. On Binko's other side is Gloria Fudless, in a short black skirt, black tights, a black blouse and a black jacket, not to mention black lipstick and black nail polish; you can take the girl out of the night, but you can't take the night out of the girl.

SHUT UP AND DEAL

Buglaroni handles the deck of cards masterfully, shuffling as fast as would seem humanly possible. The Nighten LDers are at one table, the Nighten Speechies at another table.

"You've done this before," one of the Tarleton twins -- Frick -- says.

"Definitely done this before," chimes in the other Tarleton twin -- Frank.

"Done this before many times, in saloons, casinos, on holodecks," says Frick.

"Oh, yeah, definitely on holodecks," says Frank.

"There's steam rising from those cards."

"Where there's steam there's fire."

"No, where there's smoke, there's fire."

"Where there's steam there's hot water, right."

"Always hot water."

"And hot water needs to get hot."

"Needs to get hot."

"And hot comes from fire."

"So you can't have steam without fire, so where there's steam, there's fire."

"He's smokin' now."

"Smokin'," the other Tarleton twin echoes.

"If we're going to play spades, we need a fourth," Buglaroni says.

He looks at Camelia, who turns away her head. That leaves Disney Davidson.

"Want to play?" Buglaroni asks him.

"I've played so much spades, I can do it in my sleep," Disney replies.

Buglaroni smiles. "You and I will be partners."

Disney nods, and Buglaroni lays the deck in front of Frick to cut.

ONE SINGS, THE OTHER DOESN'T

For the first time at any tournament they have ever attended, William Hand and David Brillig are not doing a duo piece.

William is going over his DI -- Dramatic Interpretation -- piece. He is sitting back in his chair, his folder on his lap, acting a little of it out, mostly familiarizing himself with it for the millionth time.

Diametrically across from William at the table is David, halfheartedly studying his prose piece. Since William read his Shylock speech at practice, David has felt the enthusiasm for forensics pour out of him like blood from a gaping wound. It was like a personal insult, venomously spit at him in public, and David is sure everyone present interpreted it as he did, that William had accused him of bigotry, and William wasn't going to stand for it.

Is David bigoted? That is a question he can barely ask himself, because he bristles at the thought of it. Of course he's not bigoted! How dare anyone suggest it!

Or is he?

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY LIKE THE NIGHT

Cartier Diamond enters the cafeteria like a queen. Her black suit is elegant as always, and as she comes through the door she pauses to push her sunglasses to the top of her head. Mordred Prentice comes in behind her, short and stout and red in the face. He too is wearing sunglasses, looking like an underripe Blues Brother, and like his owner, he stops and pushes them to the top of his head.

"I hate these one-day tournaments," Cartier says.

"Me too," Morrie agrees.

"If you're going to do this, you should at least be able to get away for a couple of days." She scans the room, taking in everyone who is worth taking in, which to Cartier is not all that many.

"Not much of a group," Morrie says, attempting to beat her to the punch.

"No," she says, her honeyed voice mixing disdain with disappointment, because Had Fleece is nowhere to be seen. And what is the point of dumping someone hard if you can't see their face the next day?

Cartier pulls down her sunglasses. "Let's join the team," she says, starting toward their table.

"Why?" Morrie asks. "Are they coming apart?"

TO PARAPHRASE THE GREAT DR. J.

"I can take five," Buglaroni says, after arranging his cards. "Make that five point three," he adds, giving it a moment's thought.

Disney Davidson looks over at him. "Can you cover a nil?"

Buglaroni considers. "I've got one big problem."

"I've got one little problem."

"Then I can probably cover it."

"All right. Five nil."

Frick and Frank have bid six tricks, and now the play begins. Disney is not too concerned about making his hand -- his goal in going nil is to take no tricks -- and his eyes wander around the room. He is disappointed that there aren't too many of his regular old buddies, but they wouldn't be likely to appear at an NDL tournament.

"Too bad we can't put a little wager on this game," Buglaroni says. "In the immortal words of Dr. Johnson, only a nincompoop would play cards for any reason other than money."

MEAT AND POTATOES WITHOUT THE MEAT, AND EVEN QUESTIONING THE POTATOES

Disney, dimly registering the first literary allusion that Buglaroni has ever uttered, but not recognizing the achievement, continues to scan the room. It's the new flock, the new breed, the new suckers, call them what you will.

His stomach growls. He had a small bowl of plain oatmeal before he left the house; around this time of day he would usually seek out a banana, but he forgot to bring any food with him, and his prospects of promoting anything more nutritional than a bag of Skittles is unlikely. Worse, there's a Mcdonalds across the street, and no other food source within walking distance.

It is going to be a long, hungry, day.

But at least he has a cigar with him. A Honduran. If he gets a round off he can take a walk and have a smoke. Cigars are one of Disney's main contradictions. Your everyday vegan fanatic tends to forswear such obvious physical vices, but Disney's objections to meat and even dairy are philosophical, not physiological., except insofar as they pertain to the physiology of the cow that provided the source of the hamburger.

Back to the new flock; that is, the human flock. They always look the same, and Disney imagines that when he was a novice he too looked too young and too short in an ill-fitted suit and a poorly knotted tie and shoes that matched nothing in the room.

SOME ENCHANTED EVENING

And then Disney notices her.

And something happens -- the unfathomable, the eternal, it happens all the time, no one understands it, who can explain it, wise men seldom try.

Disney's eyes meet the eyes of a girl across the room. A girl he has never seen before, a girl he would like to see again.

She is dressed entirely in black, not in a chic way like Cartier but in a rough, streetwise, I've-been-to-this-club-too-many-times-and-I-need-another-cigarette-and-a-stiff-drink-and-a-chance-to-reread-Sartre-before-I-sleep-tonight-with-a-heroin-addict way. Even her hair is unnaturally black, a color mixed out of a bottle provided by Snow White's wicked stepmother.

She meets Disney's stare and stares back at him. Her face is expressionless, but so is Disney's. Yet Disney feels stirrings within him, the stirrings of -- dare we say it? -- love.

K.M.A.

"Schematics!" someone screams, coming through the cafeteria door.

The magical spell between Disney Davidson and the dark mystery girl -- if there is a spell -- is broken.

"Quick, play out the hand," Buglaroni insists, loath to see a good run of cards tossed away for a mere debate.

But Frick and Frank toss in their cards, and Disney too reluctantly lays down an easy nil.

"It's time to debate," Disney says.

"Debate." Buglaroni spits out the word. "Debate can kiss my ass. We had a good hand going here."

"Later," Disney says, standing and picking up his backpack.

Disney is right.

It is time to debate.

Will Disney and GLoria become an item?

Will Tarnish and Amnea become an item?

Speaking of items, does anybody ever look at the headings of these files? Does anyone understand them?

What about K.M.R.I.A.? Or H.C.E.?

Are you sure Nora's husband got started writing debate soap operas?

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