



## Episode 75

### September Song, Give or Take a Few Months

There is an otherworldliness to the time spent at a forensics tournament. The hours are not real hours but forensics hours; they pass either with a slowness undetectable by the human consciousness, or else they speed by with an aggressive fury that is almost frightening. At the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza, it is now one of those periods of undetectable slowness.

Two rounds have taken place today, both of LD (double-flighted) and policy. According to the schedule, the next round should be after lunch at two o'clock. It is now a quarter to twelve.

Amnea Nutmilk has judged both rounds this morning, and is walking past the table in the cafeteria on which Lodestone students are selling single slices of cold, plaster-of-Paris pizza for a dollar each to a long line of debaters too lethargic to leave the building for nourishment of a more satisfying nature. She catches sight of her son sitting with an animated group at some tables that are pushed together, and decides to leave him alone with his friends. She doesn't want to hover over him, burdening him with the responsibility of entertaining his lone, lorn mother at these tournaments, but on the other hand, she could use a little human companionship, perhaps for a jaunt to an outside restaurant.

She walks out of the cafeteria and down the hall, and comes to the doorway of the judges' lounge. The lavishness that began the night before still pervades the place: there are trays of cheeses and crackers and doughnuts and bagels and cookies and celery and unidentifiable sticky buns. To Amnea, it is an unappetizing array, this spread that is the height of forensics haute cuisine. Amnea Nutmilk wants a real meal, with a beginning, a middle and an end, with vegetables and silverware and cooking and flavor and--

"Hello, there."

She turns around. Tarnish Jutmoll has come up behind her at the threshold of the judges' lounge.

"I cannot look at another bagel," she announces without preamble. "Do you want to go out to lunch?"

Jutmoll arches a white eyebrow. "Out?"

"They do let us out of here, don't they?"

"They certainly do. It isn't Auschwitz. Not in all respects, anyhow."

"Then let's find something decent to eat. We have time, don't we?"

Jutmoll looks at his watch. "Oh, yes. We have time. An hour and a half, easily."

"Then I know the perfect place. Let's go!"

And go they do. Within five minutes they are passing through the doorway of a small side-street bistro named Au Bout Du Souffle.

"Madame Nutmilk!" The small man in the gray suit standing at the bar rushes forward.

"Bon jour, Madame! Bon jour!"

"Bon jour, Anthony. You wouldn't happen to be open this early on a Saturday morning, would you?"

"Pour vous, madame, of course. Clement is in the kitchen. I'm sure he'll fix you whatever you want."

"Excellent."

The Frenchman leads Amnea Nutmilk and Tarnish Jutmoll to a corner table, the largest in the small restaurant, which comprises a long, thin room lined with tables facing banquettes on both sides, leading to the swinging doors of the kitchen. They are the only patrons in the place.

"I guess we're a little early," Tarnish says as he sits down.

"On a weekday, they'd be starting to fill up around now. It's a popular lunch place."

"They know you."

"I come here a lot. When I don't want to make a big deal out of things."

"Where do you go when you want to make a big deal?"

"I have a table twice a week at the Four Seasons."

"I'm impressed."

"You're supposed to be. A lot of my job is impressing people."

"It amazes me that you have the job that you have. This may sound silly, but you're virtually a celebrity in your own right."

"It does sound silly, Tarnish. I'm the editor of a magazine. It's fun, and sometimes it is sort of chichi, but most of the time it's pretty mundane, and even the exoticness wears off after a while and it just becomes what you do with your life."

"What you do is a lot more exciting than what I do."

She smiles. "If you compare lunching at the Four Seasons with Michael Eisner to waiting for schematics to come out for round five of the Vaganza, you're probably right."

"You eat lunch with Michael Eisner?"

"Who doesn't? He's the cheapest CEO this side of Chain Saw Al. But if you compare that to the effect you're having on the minds and lives of some of these children, it doesn't even come close."

The door of the kitchen swings open, and a large man in white with a toque perched grandly at the top of his head comes through with a big smile on his face.

"Madame Nutmilk!" This one's accent is thicker than the first one.

"Bon jour, Clement."

Their conversation remains French, which Jutmoll can only marginally follow, but there is no question that Amnea is regarded as a special customer. She and the chef discuss food for a while, and occasionally Amnea consults Tarnish in English, until they've settled on some Dover sole that Clement claims was swimming off the white cliffs less than six hours ago.

"Et pour le vin?" Amnea Nutmilk's voice trails off, allowing Clement to come up with a suggestion.

"Pas de vin!" Jutmoll interjects.

"Pas de vin?" Clement repeats, aghast as only a Gaul can be aghast at the thought of a meal without wine.

"If you drink even one glass of wine, Amnea, you won't be able to judge. It's hard enough as it is. Trust me on this."

She grimaces. "You're right, of course. I hadn't even thought of it. What would you like to drink, then?"

"Milk would be all right."

"Milk?" She makes the word sound like a curse. "Oh, why not?"

Clement shakes his head and walks back toward the kitchen, muttering to himself as he goes, "Le lait. Pour les enfants, n'est-ce pas?" His voice trails off.

"Clement is not happy," Tarnish says.

"He'll survive," Amnea replies. "We'll come back some other time and have two bottles of wine to make up for it. Unless you'd rather go to the Four Seasons?"

"You know something? I would like to go to the Four Seasons some day. To see what it's like."

"You'd be disappointed, if what you're looking for is glamor. Glamorous people aren't any different from the yahoos, except maybe their clothes fit better."

"Maybe. But I wouldn't mind being disappointed if the food's any good."

"It is. There's no question about that."

There is another break in the conversation as Anthony, the maitre'd, fusses with some bread and butter at their table, and ceremoniously presents each of them with a claret glass filled halfway with milk.

When they are left alone again, Tarnish asks, "So, are you enjoying the Vaganza?"

"Very much, actually. It's some of the best debating I've seen so far."

"It should be. This is a strong national-level tournament. The judging hasn't worn you out yet?"

"Not at all. I enjoy it."

"That's good. A lot of parents hate every minute of it. They're afraid of it. They don't want to look dumb in front of a bunch of kids, especially their own kids, but they're afraid that the activity is too arcane for them to grasp, and yet they don't spend the little energy

necessary to grasp it."

"I guess I can see why. If you don't understand the philosophy involved, you could be at a loss."

"The philosophy is at the most elemental level. I could explain to any intelligent adult enough about the social contract and deontology and justice in ten minutes that they would know more than all these kids know put together."

"Don't tell the kids that."

"They wouldn't believe me, any more than the parents do. Present company excepted, of course."

"Thank you for including me out, as Sam Goldwyn would say."

"You're very out-includable."

"Is that a compliment?"

"I have no idea."

Their lunch is served, and they talk companionably of little things for a while as they savor what to Jutmoll is one of the best pieces of fish he has ever eaten.

The milk does not do it justice.

"So you're really getting sucked into this debate business, aren't you?" Tarnish asks as their dishes are taken away.

"I really am, Tarnish. Which surprises me. I thought I would just do whatever was necessary for Chesney, but now I find myself having fun, and enjoying the kids. I've got a wierd little team that I've met with a few times, and I took them to the NDL last week. I enjoy their company, and I enjoy working with them on debate material."

"You'd better watch out, or you'll find yourself giving up Metro New York and going full time into the educating business. Or worse: the debate business."

"My midlife crisis, I guess."

"Not my choice of words," he replies diplomatically.

"You're such a gentleman, Tarnish. But I know midlife when I see it."

Anthony is back with salads, which he quickly places in front of them, disappearing once again.

"Goat cheese?" Tarnish asks.

"Inevitably," Amnea responds. "Clement can't serve a meal without dragging a goat into it somewhere, sooner or later." The fact that Amnea's original impression of Jutmoll was as the goatman does not enter her mind, despite this comment.

"It's delicious."

"Everything Clement does is delicious."

"So I have to ask you, why did you move out of the city?"

"In a word, I got divorced."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"That I was divorced?"

"That it was so recent."

"Not recent at all, really. Two years ago, after a long decline in the marriage atmosphere. You know how it is."

Tarnish shakes his head. "No, I don't. I've never been married myself."

"You've always been a bachelor? How did the women you know let that happen?"

"They've always seemed rather pleased to maintain that status quo, if you want to know the truth."

"I don't believe it. You're a charming man, Tarnish."

"You really think so?"

"I don't say what I don't think."

"That's very nice of you."

"I'm not being nice, Tarnish. I'm being honest."

She leans back in her chair, an attractive woman, perhaps a little overfed, with that wild crown of red hair. Tarnish has been intrigued by her since he first ran into her in the Andrew Johnson cafeteria.

Tarnish smiles. "If I didn't know better, Amnea, I would say that you're coming on to me."

"I am coming on to you, Tarnish." She leans forward and covers his hand with her own. "Don't look so open-mouthed. It's not illegal. It's merely efficient. We could dance around each other for months like a couple of teenagers, or we can just come out and say what we're thinking, and act on it, or not act on it, as the case may be. I've told you what I'm thinking. Now it's your turn."

"Well..." His eyes lower to the table, then return to hers. "I guess I'm thinking the same thing. I would like to have a... relationship with you."

"There we are, then."

"So now what do we do?" he asks.

She looks at her watch. "We go back and see if the schematics are out. The next round is due to start in ten minutes."

"We should get the check, then."

"Don't worry about it. They'll put it on my MNY account."

They both stand up, and after fond farewells from both Anthony and Clement, they are back outside in front of the restaurant.

"I'm going to do something now, Tarnish, that will clarify exactly what we're about today." She comes up to him and kisses him full on the lips, pulling his little body strongly into hers. When she lets go she smiles at him broadly. "I don't believe I did that," she says.

"I don't believe you did it either," he replies. He looks stunned.

She takes his arm. "Back to the Vaganza, my friend."

"Back to the Vaganza, indeed."

**Aren't Amnea and Tarnish too old for this sort of thing?**

**Will Tarnish enjoy the grub at the Four Seasons?**

**Who else will end up smooching on the streets of Manhattan before the Vaganza is over?**

**Is Rupert Murdoch a Nostrum subscriber?**

**Looking between your mashed potatoes won't help uncover the answers in our next episode: "Dharma: Elfman or Bums?"**