



Episode 84

It Worked for the Lunts, Too

It was their greatest glory.

"Parrots."

"Parrots?"

"Parrots!"

"There aren't any parrots here."

"I beg to differ. There are parrots everywhere."

"No there aren't."

"Yes there are."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want to believe. The truth remains unaffected by your beliefs, no matter how fervent they may be."

"This is a temperate zone, my good man, not a jungle."

"As temperate as a teetotalling mynah bird, no question about it. But that doesn't make the least bit of difference. Duck!"

"What?"

"I said, 'Duck!' As in, here comes one now. Watch out! Duck!"

"A duck?"

"Not a duck. A parrot."

"Why a parrot? Why not a duck?"

"We're not going to do why-a-duck, are we? Watch out! Here comes another one!"

"A duck?"

"A parrot. A killer parrot."

"So now you're telling me that there's parrots on the attack? Killer parrots?"

"I am telling you exactly that."

"And why would these killer parrots be attacking me?"

"Well, for one thing, you don't believe in them. And killer parrots are very fussy about nonbelievers. That's what makes them killers."

"For killers, they're extremely philosophical."

"Which makes them all the more deadly."

"Parrots."

"Exactly."

Every time they did the piece, it got better. They learned more about it from each audience. They learned where to pause, where to speed, where to grimace, where to show no reaction, where to duck, where not to duck.

Parrots. It was the perfect piece for them. William had found it in some obscure collection of one-acters from the 1950s. No one on the circuit had ever done it until William and David. No one had even heard of it. And it was spectacular. Funny, tricky, with interesting, developing characterizations.

And a winner. They had won with it. Parrots was the piece that put William Hand and David Brillig on the forensics map. At the beginning of the year they had alternated it with The Compleat Shakespeare, but everyone and his cousin Lamont was doing The Compleat Shakespeare. Only William and David had Parrots.

At first they started making it to the finals round. Fifth place. Fourth place. Then they won at Venerable Bede. First place. The two of them alone on the stage accepting a standing ovation. It was one of the greatest moments of both their lives. From that point on, there was no turning back. They didn't take first place again until King Ivy, but then they were poised for greatness. That same year they took CFL Nationals. And they took NFL Nationals.

They were the best in the country.

Thanks to Parrots.

David Brillig stares at the little book in his hand. It is the book that William found in that bookstore two years ago. This year they couldn't do Parrots again -- the rules allowed you to do a piece for one school year only -- but they had managed to take the Messerschmitt with not only a different piece but with a different type of piece. Dramatic. Touching. A tear to the judges' eyes. But still, it wasn't Parrots. And after the Messerschmitt--

David didn't like to think about what had happened after the Messerschmitt.

"David! The bus is going to be here in a minute!"

"I'm almost ready," he replies automatically.

It is Monday morning, and he has been scouring the bookshelves looking for a good piece for he and Kumar to perform. That is how he found his old copy of Parrots. A souvenir of his glory days. And no help at all in putting together a new piece with a new partner.

"David!"

"Coming!"

"Now. I'm not kidding."

I'm not kidding either, David mutters to himself. He stands up. The copy of Parrots is in his hand. For a moment he holds it over the wastepaper basket, then he lets go. It hits the metal with a thud.

Parrots -- and William -- are now officially behind him.

Kumar -- and the future -- and the school bus -- await.

Birds Gotta Swim, Fish Gotta Fly

The chill of autumn adds an extra rosiness to the tanned cheeks of Brett Saxon as she strides down Central Park West. She is dressed almost entirely in variations of khaki, from her field jacket to her backpack to her hiking shoes. Her honey-blond hair, still streaked by the tropical sun of the Yucatan peninsula, is tied at the back of her neck, and the pony tail bounces breezily as she walks. The only color in her attire is the red-and-white bandanna tucked loosely into her jacket collar.

"Yes!" The word rushes to her lips but remains unspoken. She wishes she had someone to tell, someone to high-five her and congratulate her, someone to return the smile that is bursting within her. But she won't see Braun until tonight. She will have to wait until then to share her excitement.

I knew it, she thinks, going over in her mind the events that have just transpired in the cramped, dusty office of Dr. Jones -- the Dr. Thelonius Jones -- in the Museum of Natural History. I knew he would accept my proposal. I knew he'd get the funding. I knew he'd get me there. Which is, of course, a total fiction because until the old professor met with her today Brett had only hoped and dreamed that he might say maybe, except instead his answer was an unqualified yes. Yes, yes, yes--

"Yes!" This time the word does escape her, but she doesn't care, and she ignores the people she is walking past. Yes, yes, yes!

Her car is parked on 67th Street. There isn't much time, she thinks, as she unlocks the driver's side door. Less than one month to get everything organized and to get herself to the Belize dig. Three and a half weeks, to be exact. Not much time at all. She had four months to prepare for the Yucatan. Three and a half weeks isn't enough time to plan a trip to the mall, much less to the interior of Belize to unearth what may be the greatest precolumbian site ever. Dr. Jones's dig is at the threshold of what appears to be the complete level of a city older and more complete than any so far discovered in Central America, or anywhere else in the New World. And Brett is going to be a part of it. She is going to be there when they break through next month, and for the rest of the winter as they begin to bring forth the unknown riches of a past that has hitherto only been imagined.

For the rest of the winter... That means leaving Braun alone again. She hates to do that. In the years of their marriage they have spent almost half their time apart, because of her

and her work. Braun knew that this would happen, and he has never complained, but that doesn't make it any less difficult to be apart. She loves him, and she doesn't want to upset their marriage. But then, this was always part of the deal. It is not an upset. This is part of the woman Braun married. Brett smiles as she maneuvers the car onto the Henry Hudson parkway. She is so lucky to have met Braun. He is the perfect mate for her. There when she needs him, understanding of her when she isn't there. What more could she ask for?

A lot of people -- including both their parents -- thought they were marrying too young, exactly one week after graduating college. But she and Braun knew what they were getting into on both sides, and it still feels like a honeymoon.

When Brett is there to enjoy it.

The first thing she will have to do when she completes the hour-long drive home today is make a list of clothes, although most of what she had in the Yucatan should suffice again. Then there's the question of books. She knows there are some texts somewhere in the house, including one of Dr. Jones's own treatises. She's got to bone up on all of that, and she'd better start right away. And then there's Braun. She does have to tell Braun that she's leaving again almost immediately after coming home. He will understand, she tells herself again, but she is struck by a sudden inspiration. She will make tonight into a celebration. Leg of lamb, which is Braun's favorite dinner, with little roasted potatoes and fresh green beans sauteed in the merest hint of olive oil. And the Ridge Petit Sirah, one of the ones in the corner of the basement that Braun is attempting to transform into a wine cellar. The Petit Sirah can stand up to roasted beast; hell, the stuff is so solid, it's only a courtesy to bother storing it in a bottle in the first place.

Brett maps one thing after the other that she must do, creating a mental list of mental lists. But the dinner will be important. It will smooth the path. Not that the path needs smoothing... But better safe than sorry. You have to work at marriages. Especially marriages marked by long absences.

Long absences. She recalls her return last month. Maybe long absences aren't so bad, because they do make reunions that much more wonderful. Her first days back with Braun were, well, talk about honeymoons!

She does have to wonder what he does to fill the empty time while she's away. As an advertising copy writer working his way up the ranks, he does often have to work late hours, getting home from Manhattan at the most godforsaken times. But not every day. And how does he spend weekends? She's been trying to urge him to take up a hobby. Something time-consuming. Golf would be a start, but that's only in the summer. Maybe oil painting. She wonders if he has any talent for painting. She wonders if he has any interest. She could buy him a starter set of acrylics, and maybe some cheap canvases. It would be a lot less expensive than golf clubs.

After stopping at the supermarket and acquiring everything she needs for tonight's feast, she pulls into the driveway of their little raised ranch house, a true starter home in every

sense. There's barely enough room for the two of them, much less the leg of lamb. And, she thinks as she starts making dinner, imagine if they wanted to start a family--

Brett pauses as she dumps the bag of mixed salad greens into the spinner. When will they have a family? Not yet, definitely. Not for a long time. Not while she's still going off to digs, putting together her Masters. Maybe after she has her doctorate? But she still won't want to stop traveling, being on-site where the action is. She pours cold water onto the greens. She has to be where the action is.

After getting everything organized for dinner -- it is still too early to start cooking anything -- she sets about her other tasks. The clothes first. That's an easy one. She pulls open her bedroom closet's folding doors and stares in at her vast collection of khakiana. Two pairs of boots, two weeks supply of shirts and underwear, a couple of pairs of pants and shorts. There really isn't much else she needs. Bug spray! Make a real list, she tells herself. She goes into the kitchen and returns with a pad and pen. Number one item to purchase: bug spray.

For an hour she goes over her clothes, making sure each item will stand up to the rigors of field life for an entire winter. Occasionally she decides to replace this or that, or is struck by an idea like the bug spray, and she adds that item to the list. By the time she thinks to look at her watch it is four o'clock. Time to start the leg of lamb.

Brett turns on music while she cooks, some unremarkable Vivaldi that keeps her moving and mindlessly contented. Concerto 4325 for whatever original instruments are lying around, transcribed for whatever other instruments are in the basement of the recording studio. Vivaldi. All-purpose stuff. The perfect background.

With the roast studded with garlic and rosemary and tucked into a slow oven, Brett is ready to tackle her next task, digging up that book of Dr. Jones's. She wants to read it as soon as possible because it is in this work that he lays out his own timetable for the settlement of the New World. He isn't radically different from the orthodox estimates, but he is specific and original enough to bear further study. Especially if she is going to be assisting him on a dig that could prove or disprove his thesis.

The Vivaldi continues as she pokes around the most likely spots for the book, namely, the bookshelves. She and Braun -- especially Braun -- are big on arranging things in order, but the Jones isn't with the science books, or the history books, or the unfiled books, or any other of the logical places. There must be a thousand novels in the house, most of them paperbacks, all of them arranged by author. She looks under Jones. James Jones. Then James Joyce. But no Thelonius Jones.

She stands back from the shelves, staring at them. After looking everywhere, she is beginning to get frustrated. She knows the book has to be here somewhere. She remembers buying it last summer. She knows she brought it home. She had to put it somewhere...

The timer rings in the kitchen, and she goes in to take a look at the lamb. Not that there's anything to do but look. No basting. But she gives it a little shove in its pan to keep it from sticking. The smell of meat and garlic and rosemary is starting to permeate the room.

She looks over at the cookbooks. Could it be there? Impossible. But it is also impossible that it isn't in the other room where it belongs. Not that she looks at the cookbooks much, aside from her Joy of Cooking that her mother gave her as a bridal shower gift, the book that her mother herself had sworn by for all those years. The other cookbooks are Braun's. Braun loves to cook, and he's expert at it. He doesn't consult cookbooks for their recipes, he reads them for their ideas. He is happiest if a so-called cookbook has no recipes at all.

Braun. She can't believe how lucky she is to have found a man like him.

Her fingers thumb along the dozens of cookbooks. Nope. None of these is the Jones in disguise, wearing an metaphorical apron and hiding in the kitchen.

She pulls a marble composition book out from next to a culinary guide to Tuscany. She wonders. A composition book? Like a kid's school notebook. She can't imagine what it could be. Braun's own secret recipe book? She wouldn't put it past him.

In the little white box on the front cover, where you're supposed to enter your name and class, there are only the initials CD. Not in Braun's handwriting.

A book listing CDs, obviously. But what's it doing out here?

She flips it open and leafs through the pages.

Not CDs. Class notes. Biology. High school biology.

Why in God's name would there be a high school biology note book in her kitchen? As far as she knows, there has never been a high school kid in this house since they built the place.

As she nears the end, where the pages that have thickened with use meet the pages that are still untouched, she is about to slam the book shut and toss it aside when she sees one word that stops her cold.

The word Braun. In big block letters, carefully sketched in with hatchmarks and curlicues.

Braun?

She starts examining the book more closely. In the beginning there is nothing but biology notes, but on the last twenty or so pages Braun's name is repeated again and again,

sometimes small, sometimes large, sometimes plain, sometimes decorated. Sometimes just Braun, sometimes Braun Saxon.

And not once, not twice, but three times: Cartier Saxon. Plus one Cartier D. Saxon.

Brett sinks into one of the chairs at the kitchen table. She has no idea what she is looking at, but she doesn't like it one bit.

Not one single bit.

Will David ever find another Parrots?

Will Brett ever find another Braun?

Will Braun ever find another Cartier?

Will Hillary forget that she isn't the nominee?

Will the price of gas ever match the price of beans?

Look for the silver lining anywhere but in our next episode: "Llamas: Dalai clerics burdened by extra els, or South America's answer to the Honda Civic?"