



Episode 85

The End of Rico

"He wants to see you," the secretary says, tilting her head to indicate the closed door to the principal's office. She is typing away at her computer while she speaks.

Tarnish Jutmoll smiles. "I have this period off."

"I know," the secretary says. She is an elderly woman, craggy and gray, and she is looking at Tarnish over the rims of her reading glasses.

"Yes," Tarnish responds. "I guess you would."

Offices. School offices. They are the node of activity within the school, at least as far as the teachers are concerned. It is the place where newspapers are picked up, mail is delivered, paychecks are distributed, human companionship over voting age is readily available, and the administrators who are running the place wheel and deal and tell you whether you're coming or going. Only the teachers' lounges rate higher on the humanity scale as far as the adults are concerned. Students, on the other hand, can transact entire four-year careers, with or without either honors or horrors, and virtually never know that the office exists. Much of their awareness of this hub of the academic universe depends on the principal. An open-door, back-slapping, gung-ho, I'm-in-it-just-for-the-kids administrator makes his or her presence felt, and since the principal's office is always the center of the school office, even if they are not literally attached, the office becomes a considerable part of student life. On the other hand, a closed-door, child-hating, gung-no, I'm-in-it-just-for-the-pension administrator makes not only himself as principal but all his surroundings a black hole in the students' universe. If the principal doesn't care about them, they can hardly be bothered to care about him or her in return. Nighten Day School's principal, Raoul Walsh, is closer to the latter clam-like loner than the gregarious my-door-is-always-open-to-the-students type. In fact, his door is never open, either to the students, the teachers, or his fellow administrators, including even his highest ranking myrmidons, the assistant principal and that soul of the student body, the school nurse.

The denizens of the Nighten office are not much different from the average office staff. There is the one secretary who has been with the district since the invention of universal public education. She is barely detectable behind the wall of greenery that she has been cultivating since the building originally opened, although persons inadvertently touching her coffee mug have had fingers sliced off. She knows everything there is to know, past or present, about everybody and everything related to the school, and she knows it, and everyone else knows it. If you want something, you have to get it from her. She is the most powerful person in the building, and that includes the principal.

The next of the usual suspects is the long-suffering assistant principal. In any school, it appears to anyone who's paying attention that while the principal seems to wield all the power (or at least all the power not already claimed by the doyenne secretary), it is the assistant principal that does all the work. Especially the unpleasant work: suspensions, expulsions, meetings with the parents of the afterschool drug-dealers club, stopping the fights in the cafeteria. It is unclear why one would choose the position of assistant, and perhaps long-suffering assistants are perennially on the make for advancement, applying for every principal position in every school that advertises in the Assistant Principal Gazette, yet without fail, as principals come and go (that is, *if* principals come and go -- they often have a tinge of eternity about them), assistants remain constant.

Continuing down the list, no school would be safe for teen-aged humanity if its public health were not upheld by the school nurse. Presumably this highly trained member of the medical community is available on-site primarily in case of emergency; come a flood or earthquake or volcano, it will be the nurse who is at the ready with bandages and plasma and gurneys, briskly walking along the halls doing triage, calling out in a take-charge voice, "Critical. Non-crit. Crit. Crit. O.R., stat. Stet. Code Blue," and all those other Chicago Hope meets M*A*S*H jargon bites. In between disasters, when she isn't sticking a thermometer in the mouth of a student with a cut finger, and depending on whether or not the school has a policy of distributing free condoms (which turns the nurse's job into a full-time socio-political nightmare and takes up every minute of the day, provided the nurse can find the psychic energy to get out of bed in the morning to face another spell at the aren't-these-people-a-little-too-young-for-this-but-half-of-them-are-pregnant battle front), the nurse usually takes on loose administrative chores that no one else can be bothered with, like nose-counting as the young 'uns board the buses for field trips or hosting assemblies when the local gendarmerie come to display the latest collection of crack vials and Saturday night specials they have picked up behind the local deli.

The last traditional office person, who does not exist at Nighten Day but is considered optional at high schools in general, is the Hot Cookie. In age, the Hot Cookie is approximately halfway between the ancient doyenne secretary and the average freshman. This puts her at what would traditionally be considered a certain age, but she doesn't seem to realize it. She wears tight, short dresses, she has long blond hair with a good six inches of black roots at the starting point, and she is made-up as if she is going to the prom, with everything applied a little too thick and a little too wide. She is a single woman who enjoys flirting with all the students, most of whom consider her the weirdest

of all the office denizens, except for one or two whose hormones prevent them from making any discriminations about any women one way or the other, especially women who are sending off signals that they have had a sexual thought sometime within the last four decades.

In the Nighten Day office now it is one o'clock in the afternoon, and sixth period has just begun. Tarnish Jutmoll knocks on the principal's closed door. There is no answer. He knocks again, louder. With Principal Walsh there is always the ritual wait.

"Who is it?" The voice is muffled at the other side of the door.

"Tarnish."

"Wait a minute."

He waits. A minute.

"Come in."

Tarnish opens the door.

"Good afternoon, Tarnish." Nighten Day School principal Raoul Walsh is sitting behind his desk, which is littered with his endless principalian paperwork. He stands as Tarnish enters the room. "Let's sit over here," he says, indicating the conversation corner. He takes one of the chairs as Tarnish Jutmoll drops himself down onto the couch. The cushions are too soft and too low, and Tarnish sinks in so far that the bones of his butt are scraping against the wooden underframe of the furniture.

"So," Walsh begins, staring at Jutmoll with his one good unpatched eye. "How are things going?"

"Going? Oh, going well. Fine. Definitely fine." A vague question like that from Principal Walsh is not a good start to a conversation.

"Good." The white-haired principal nods. "You had a tournament this last weekend?"

Jutmoll nods. "The Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza."

"Ah, yes. The OriginalVaganza. All other vaganzas are extra. Cute. Very cute."

"You know Mr. Lo Pat, don't you? The Lodestone coach? He named it."

"He's not exactly a cute fellow, if I remember him correctly."

"Being cute is not something Mr. Lo Pat is often accused of," Jutmoll agrees.

There is a moment's uncomfortable silence. Raoul Walsh sighs.

"You probably know why I wanted to talk to you," the principal says. "It's about the team."

"The finances?"

"The finances. The non-existent finances."

"You said we could make it through the end of the calendar year."

Walsh shakes his head. "That's not going to work out anymore. Things are tighter than I thought. What is your schedule for the rest of the year?"

"We're off this weekend."

"That's unusual."

"Very unusual. Then a speech tournament at Blessed Moly, a debate tournament at Algren-on-the-Beach--"

"That's Massachusetts?"

"Right."

"Motels?"

"Only for me. The students are housed."

"Good."

"And after that, Venerable Bede, which is both speech and debate. And then Thanksgiving."

"Venerable Bede is Philadelphia?"

"Yes."

"Motels?"

"Yes. For everyone."

Raoul Walsh shakes his head. "The Moly and Algren won't cost much. But I think that Venerable Bede is out. Isn't he a saint now, by the way?"

"I don't know. I don't keep up on Catholic hagiography. Except of course the Holocaust nuns."

"They've promoted a lot of these people lately, so they should be referred to as saints, but everyone is so used to their old ranks that they continue to refer to them that way. Venerable Bede. Mother Seton."

"I don't think Mother is actually a church designation, Raoul. I think it goes Blessed, Venerable and then Saint."

"Then colonel, then general. Full bird. Stars." Principal Walsh begins to sing: "Would you rather be a colonel with an eagle on your shoulder, or a private with a chicken on your knee? You know that song?"

"I don't think so."

"No matter. The Catholics should run their saints the way they run the army. You wear the correct insignia, and everyone refers to you by your rank rather than your name. Good morning, Venerable. Good morning, Blessed."

Jutmoll tries to steer the conversation back to forensics. "So you're saying that we can't go to Venerable Bede?"

"I'm saying that you're going to have to fold up your tent after Algren, Tarnish. That will have to be your last tournament. The team will have to disband after that."

"So our tournament, the Snow Ball, is definitely out?"

"I'm afraid so. Even if you could pull it off, you wouldn't even make enough money to go to King Ivy. So what's the point?"

"So what's the point..."

Raoul Walsh puts a thin gray hand on Tarnish's knee. "You've had a good run, Tarnish. You made a great team for many years. You can be proud of your achievements. And you'll still have your debate class, so you'll still be able to keep your hand in, so to speak."

Jutmoll keeps his eyes to the floor. "We had said we wouldn't tell the kids until the last minute."

"I don't know if that's a good idea. I had thought a clean break, but they do plan in advance. They ought to know that pretty soon their time is going to be their own."

"At least they'll be getting their weekends back."

"Exactly."

Jutmoll looks up, into Principal Walsh's good eye. "There's no appealing this decision?"

"Not at all. Unless you can come up with a twenty thousand dollar gift from somewhere to support the team."

"A fairy godmother."

"Yes. But there are no fairy godmothers, Tarnish. Not in real life."

"Not in real life," Jutmoll agrees.

Raoul Walsh stands up. "So you'll tell the kids?"

Jutmoll also rises. "I'll do it today. It's Monday, our all-team meeting. They'll all be there."

"Would you like me to be there? For moral support?"

Jutmoll shakes his head. "Thanks, Raoul, but I think I have to do this alone."

Walsh nods. "I'm sorry, Tarnish. If it were up to me..."

"I know, Raoul. Thank you."

Walsh puts his hand on Jutmoll's shoulder and walks him to the door. "Good luck, Tarnish."

Tarnish Jutmoll walks out into the main office as the bell rings. Three minutes till the next and last period.

And this is how the world ends, not with a bang but with a whimper.

And a budget cut.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

Now Hear This!

Tarnish Jutmoll does not like to do this, but for the last class of the day he resorts to the final refuge of the pedagogic scoundrel: the film strip. "Our Friends, the Tasmanians." A classic. Nowadays the film strip, which when Jutmoll first began teaching literally was a strip of film, is a videotape, but the result is the same. The students either doze off or make out in the dark, except for the die-hard brown-nosers who actually watch the show, while the teacher lazes either at the desk or in the back of the room where no one can see him. It is an opportunity for the teacher to present state-certified instruction materials related to the course curriculum and thus acceptable as a classroom experience, while not having to teach anybody anything. A trained gnu could run a film strip. As a rule, Tarnish thinks only harsh negative thoughts about prefab curriculum, but on a day like this one, it beats having to pretend the world is a wonderful place and that social studies is the best way to find out about it.

"Good afternoon."

The voice, slightly garbled by the electronics that deliver it to the classrooms, comes across the loudspeaker as the film on our Tasmanian amigos winds to a well-deserved finale. Tarnish flips off the VCR.

The class begins paying, if possible, even less attention to the announcements than to the film strip. A different member of the Nighten Day Student Organization is responsible for each afternoon's announcements. Today's master of ceremonies sounds about as articulate as a pork chop. He will now proceed to fill up the last five minutes of the school day.

"Please stand for the pledge of alleg--" There is a snap, and the loudspeaker is turned off, then quickly turned back on again.

"Belay that pledge." It is Principal Walsh.

"I forgot it was the afternoon." The pork chop again. "Congratulations to the Nighten Day Peccaries, losing to the Toulouse-Lautrec Bistros by a mere one touchdown in Saturday's big game this weekend. There will be no football practice this afternoon... I don't why. Be prepared to practice again tomorrow.

"Cheerleader practice today in room 105. Since the professional pom pons have not arrived yet from Argentina, freshman and sophomores should not report until tomorrow.

"The Rifle Club will meet at bus number 336 to ride together to the rifle range. Be

prepared for blindfold drill. The, uh, what's this? The, oh, the no-semiautomatic rule is still in effect. "Go NRA." Practice is only open to students who are registered in the club; remember the club slogan: 'Just because you're armed doesn't make you a shooter.'

"The Monday Chess Club meeting is cancelled. Those wishing to play will have to make other arrangements, if he can find someone to play with. Sorry, Durwood.

"Due to the large turnout at the inaugural meeting last week, the Tropical Fish Club will gather this afternoon in the football stadium. Please remember to bring your photos of your home aquarium. Voting will take place today to choose the club name: The Tetras or the Hermit Crabs. Be ready to cast your ballot.

"Track practice will be outdoors today. Please remember that there is a ban on South Park sweatshirts. Only approved Nighten Day teamware will be allowed.

"The principal wishes to remind everyone that smoking is not permitted anywhere on the grounds of the high school. If you are in your car, and your car is parked in the school parking lot, that means that you are on the grounds. Contrary to popular belief, your automobile is not the equivalent of a foreign embassy. You are not on your own home soil because you are in your car. Students caught smoking in their cars will lose their parking spaces for the rest of the year.

"The Speech and Debate Team will have their combined meeting in Mr. Jutmoll's classroom this afternoon, as usual every Monday.

"The statue of Francis of Assisi is missing again from St. Francis's church next door. On the off chance that the -- what is this? -- oh -- hooligans -- what are hooligans? -- okay, I'm sorry." There is a slight cough. "On the off chance that the hooligans responsible for its theft are Nighten Day hooligans, please return the saint before the nuns decide you should fry in hell for your sin.

"Remember, Thursday is Village People day at Nighten Day School. Come dressed as your personal favorite Village person, and be ready to perform *YMCA* at the drop of a hat.

"Anyone going on Miss Mooney's Broadway field trip to see *Cats* -- again -- should have their money in by Friday at the latest.

"Time and tide and SATs wait for no man. If you are not in your seat by eight o'clock on Saturday, you are not taking the SATs.

"Tomorrow's lunch special in the cafeteria will be Tuscan meat loaf, mashed mealy potatoes, cauliflower delight and India relish.

"Just because the golf team has packed up their plus fours for the season does not mean that the Nighten golfers can rest on their laurels. To get a team letter in golf you must go

to the driving range at least four times during the winter break and bring the receipts to the coach to prove it. Like, fore, dude.

"Science Club will meet Tuesday and Thursday but not Wednesday. This is particle physics week, for those who wish to prepare themselves in advance.

"The Students Against Drunk Driving annual car wash fundraiser is this Sunday at the firehouse. Volunteers wanted. It may get cold out there, so dress accordingly. Principal Walsh apologizes that all the good warm-weather dates were already taken when the SADD people tried to get their fundraiser organized. Plan ahead next year, guys.

"The preserved cat is missing from the formaldehyde tank in the biology lab. If the culprit will return it where he or she found it, no questions will be asked.

"Homecoming in two weeks, Peccary fans. Mark your calendars!"

And with that, the bell rings. The last class has ended, and school is dismissed for the day. Those not wishing to take their lives into their hands will lie low until the stampeding hordes are in their buses and on their way to the other halves of their existences.

Will Nighten Day make it to Venerable Bede?

Will Venerable Bede make it to heaven?

Will there be more announcements tomorrow afternoon?

Will Nostrum never win the Nobel Literature prize?

Will the baseball season start going on so long that we have to combine the World Series with the Superbowl and have the final game be the Yankees versus Green Bay?

Cast your vote for impeachment in our next episode: "Bananas: Fruit in a suit, or populist in pajamas?"