



Episode 86

Say It Isn't So, Jutmoll

An afterschool meeting of any team is an animal that is neither the fish of academics or the fowl of private life. Extracurricular activities are a part of school, but not a part of school. As a result, the participants who occupy this nether arena do not act as they would in the school environment, but they do not act as they would if they weren't in the school environment. They act... extracurricularly. And so do their coaches or instructors or advisers. Discipline is relaxed, but not eliminated. The authority of the adult is modulated, but not ignored. The goal of education and entertainment are now blended roughly fifty-fifty, and everyone acts accordingly.

At Nighten Day's all-team meeting, Tarnish Jutmoll watches from the back of the room as both the Speechies and the LDers come toddling in, singly, in pairs, in drips and drabs for about five minutes after the final bell. He pretends to be immersed in an open folder, but he greets them all as they arrive before lowering his eyes back to the page in front of him, on which he has written a few brief notes summarizing his remarks for this afternoon, to make sure that he doesn't overlook anything.

As the last bus is pulling out of the yard behind the school and past the classroom window, blowing in noise and diesel fumes, Tarnish realizes that every single member of the Nighten Day Speech and Debate team is, for perhaps for the first time in history, present for a meeting.

They would pick today to be responsible forensics citizens.

The little--

Tarnish Jutmoll suspends that thought. It isn't fair. It isn't their fault that the end is nigh.

As usual, as they take their seats they split up into their respective areas of concentration. Speechies on one side, debaters on the other. In each of those groups there are further divisions: Extempers sit together and Interpers sit together and varsity sit together and novices sit together. Only Cartier Diamond and her familiar, Mordred Prentice, sit apart from their event groups. Which is understandable, perhaps, because in Tarnish's estimation Cartier is an event in and of herself, and Mordred is like the bat boy or water carrier, or whatever it is that a Cartier team needs to make it successful on the field.

"I guess everybody is here," Tarnish begins, walking up to the front of the room. He has decided to make this short and sweet, at least to begin with.

"All present and accounted for," Griot says with a smile. Tarnish has always liked Griot, with his cheerful round face and unruly Manchurian-devil mustache. Tarnish will miss him.

Tarnish will miss all of them.

"Like, are we going to get out of here in time for the late bus?" Buglaroni asks.

All right. Tarnish correct himself. He will miss most of them.

"You'll be out in plenty of time, Mr. Buglaroni." Tarnish scans the room, taking one of his last inventories. In addition to Griot and Buglaroni among the LDers, there are the Maru sisters, sitting one behind the other at the front of the classroom. Jasmine has just been coming into her own, while Camelia as a novice has demonstrated a natural knack for LD that Tarnish hasn't seen since Griot first arrived. Trat and Ellie are sitting next to each other because Trat and Ellie are always sitting next to each other. They have brought romance, if little else, to the activity. Tarnish imagines that they will never part, through college, through adulthood, through Social Security and side-by-side graves under a single tombstone. The future businessmen of America, Frick and Frank Tarleton, would probably have used forensics as a lever into the Ivy League. They will no doubt quickly find a different lever before the meeting today is over. On the speech side, in addition to Cartier and Mordred, there are William Hand and David Brillig, perhaps the best duo team Tarnish has ever seen, but for some reason these former best friends are not only not talking to each other, but they are sitting as far apart in the room as is physically possible. Kumar is sitting next to David; the two of them are hoping to prepare a Duo piece for the Blessed Moly, and maybe they'll do it. Kumar is a talented, funny kid, but at times he seems adrift, off to the side with his wry smile and his inevitable fedora. Mark and Noah, the Extempers, have that serious, can-I-leave-now-and-read-the-paper look on their faces. They live, sleep, eat and breathe news. The events of the world are, to them, the gossip of the day, and they do not wish to miss a single piece of it. And finally Original Orator Ashley Ambrose, the only girl at Nighten Day today in a navy blue dress suit -- or any suit -- with a starched white shirt and red Hermes scarf around her neck as if to hide the scars of her hanging, her bland unfocussed smile glowing back at him...

"I have an announcement to make," Tarnish says. "The team--" He hesitates. "The team," he begins again, "is going to be disbanded."

"What?" Buglaroni is looking at Tarnish as if he has spoken a foreign language. "What do you mean, disbanded?"

"Finished, Mr. Buglaroni. Over and done with. It is a decision that is not in my hands. We will be able to participate in the Blessed Moly, and at Algren-On-The-Beach, and that will be it. Our last tournaments. There will be no more Nighten Day Speech and Debate team after that."

"Why not?" Griot asks.

"Finances," Tarnish replies. "There is just so much money in the pot, and it is the decision of the school board that they can no longer spend that money on forensics."

"Why not?"

"You people -- people your age, that is -- are at the vanguard of a mini baby boom. There are a lot of kids coming up behind you. The estimate is that enrollment at Nighten Day in the next four years will be fifty percent higher than it is today. All those kids are going to need services--"

"And Speech and Debate is not going to be one of those services," William Hand concludes for him.

"I'm afraid not."

"It's because forensics is perceived as too elite, isn't it?" William continues.

Tarnish shrugs. "Perhaps."

"So we won't be going to Venerable Bede?" Cartier asks.

"I'm afraid not. For Speechies, the Moly will be it. For debaters, it will be Algren."

"That, like, really sucks," Buglaroni says.

"It really, like, does," Tarnish agrees, responding in Buglaroni's own native language.

"If it's only a matter of money--" Ashley Ambrose says.

"Only?" Griot interrupts her.

"Only," she repeats. "If it's only about money, we can do something about that. We can have fundraisers."

Griot nods. "Yeah, sure. We could have fundraisers."

The idea of boosterism has Ashley out of her seat. "We could do all kinds of things," she says grandly, waving her hand across the air to emphasize the concept of all kinds. "There must be a million ways to make money. For starters, we could have a car wash, and then a bake sale."

"We could put on a show," Kumar interjects. "People would pay for it. That would be different."

"You're being sarcastic," Ashley says, the hint of a pout pulling at the edges of her otherwise imperturbable smile.

"And you're being a polyanna," Kumar tells her. "Do you have any idea how much money we would need to keep this team going?"

"Do you?" Ashley replies.

Kumar is stymied. "Actually, I can't say that I do." Both he and Ashley turn to Tarnish. "How much does it take?" Kumar asks.

"Too much to make by selling doughnuts. Twenty thousand or so, give or take a little here and there."

"What about the Snow Ball?" Griot asks. "Don't we make a lot of money with our tournament?"

"Between two and three thousand on a good year, if it doesn't snow and the Floridians show up," Tarnish says. "It's not enough."

"So we won't even have the Snow Ball this year?"

"If there's no team, there's not much point to it."

"But the tradition!" Griot exclaims.

"The tradition will be over," Tarnish says. "The school will have to start coming up with new traditions."

There is a silence in the room. The enormity of what Tarnish has been telling them is beginning to sink in. Their favorite extracurricular activity -- for some of them, their defining extracurricular activity; for that matter, their defining activity, extracurricular or otherwise -- is being taken away from them. In a way, depending on their personal commitment to the activity, it is somewhere between having the rug pulled out from under you and the end of the world.

"That's really all I have to say today," Tarnish concludes. "We still have a few more weeks, and two more tournaments. Let's make the most of them. Tomorrow I'll meet with the Speechies, as usual. Okay?"

There are a couple of agreeing nods.

"Okay, then." Tarnish turns to Buglaroni. "See? You'll make the late bus, no problem."

"I guess so," Buglaroni says. His eyes are cast down. Even he seems to be affected by the announcement. Even Buglaroni.

Tarnish shakes his head. He knew it would be bad, but it's even worse that his worst nightmare. Even Buglaroni is upset by the announcement.

"See you tomorrow," Tarnish says, spinning on his heel and exiting the room, for the first time in recorded history being the first and not the last person to leave a Speech and Debate meeting.

Because he doesn't want the kids to see.

To know.

That there are tears in his eyes.

Did He Who Made the Lamb Make Thee?

The sounds of Braun's arrival jar Brett Saxon from her sullen stupor. She has been sitting in the kitchen, surrounded by a progressively stronger smell of roasting sheep, imagining scenario after scenario to account for her discovery. But she keeps coming back to the simplest explanation.

It is a school girl's composition book. In her house. A school girl with a crush on her husband.

But how could that be?

"Hi, Hon," Braun says as he enters through the kitchen door. He kisses her on the side of the forehead. "Whoa. It smells really good in here."

"Lamb," she says so softly as to be practically inaudible. She is staring at the empty counter top in front of her.

"Ham?"

"Lamb. You know, as in sheep."

"Roast lamb? Great. I love roast lamb."

"I know."

He begins walking out of the kitchen, presumably to change his clothes and to wash up after the long day in the office in the city. Brett has yet to make eye contact with him.

"Don't," she says.

He comes to a halt in the doorway and turns around.

"Don't what?"

"Don't go away."

"I just want to get out of this suit."

"Not yet. I want to talk to you." She finally looks up at him. He is twenty-four years old, his thick brown hair crowning a solid, classic face of blue eyes, tiny pointed nose, and the cutest dimple in his chin that always seems to defy his morning razor. He is still one of the most gorgeous men she has ever seen in her life.

His forehead furrows. "What? Is something wrong?" He walks toward her. "Things didn't work out with Dr. Jones at the museum?"

She shakes her head. "Things worked out fine. I'm going to Belize. In three and a half weeks, give or take an hour or two."

"That's great!" Braun extends his arms to hug her, but he shakes him away.

"No."

"No? No what?" He looks at her with total lack of understanding, his mouth open, confused. "What's the matter with you? Belize is what you wanted, isn't it?"

She looks him straight in the eye. "Who is Cartier?" she asks.

His jaw drops even further.

"I asked you a question, Braun. Who is Cartier?"

"Cartier?" He can barely get the word out.

"Cartier. Like the jeweler. Down the street from Tiffany's. Ring a bell?"

"Cartier." He says it softly, as if rolling it around his mind. "Cartier."

"Yes, Cartier. She seems to have a crush on you, if the notes in her school books are any indication."

"The notes in her school books?"

"Maybe you were having affairs with schoolgirls while I was in the Yucatan. Is that it?"

"What do you mean, her school books? Show me."

She reaches under the counter and pulls out the composition book. She tosses it in front of him. He picks it up gingerly, as if it might sprout fangs and bite him. He thumbs through it as she did, seeing first only biology notes, and then doodles, then Braun doodles, then Braun and Cartier 4ever doodles.

Brett is getting sick to her stomach.

"I can explain this," Braun says.

"Good. That's exactly what I want."

"Cartier was..."

"Go ahead. Tell me. Was what?"

"She was, like..."

"Your explanation is most illuminating. All my questions are now answered."

He drops the composition book on the counter. "I don't know what to say." His voice is choked and husky. "I just don't know."

"Why is this book in my house?" Brett asked. "Was this Cartier person in my house?"

Braun nods.

"Is this some college girl you picked up while I was away? Is that what you're trying to tell me? I leave you alone for a couple of months, and you're out robbing the cradle and fooling around and doing God knows what--"

"You don't understand, Brett. It was no big thing."

"No big thing? No big thing to who? To Cartier? Did you look at what she's written in there? Cartier Saxon. As in Mr. and Mrs. Braun Saxon. Did you tell her you were going to marry her, is that it?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't propose to a high sch--" Braun stops himself before he finishes the words, but it is too late.

"A high school girl? Are you telling me this Cartier person is a high school girl?"

Braun gulps. "She was... mature for her age."

There are times in everyone's life when the exact, precise, perfect action is called for. A revelation of such enormity has transpired -- such as the fact that your twenty-four-year-old husband has been having an affair with a high school girl while you've been on an archaeological dig in the Yucatan -- that anything less than the right response would leave you regretting for the rest of your life that you didn't correctly seize the moment and do what you should have done, when you should have done it.

Brett realizes that this is such a moment. She stands slowly and goes to the oven. Putting on her gray quilted hot mitts, she opens the door and pulls out the rack on which the leg of lamb is slowly roasting. It has been cooking for approximately an hour. It is only beginning to brown, and still has a slightly raw look. She pulls the roasting pan to the top of the stove.

"It's a shank end," she says softly.

"What?"

"A shank end. Much easier to handle." Still wearing her thermal mitts, she grabs one end of the half-cook leg of lamb and lurches toward her husband, wielding the meat like a medieval weapon, whapping him on the shoulders with it, on the back, on the head, as he futilely tries to protect himself.

"You pervert!" she yells as she continues to wallop him with the roast. "You criminal! You... you... Humbert Humbert!"

There is nothing he can do to stop her. She is too furious, too fierce. His only open avenue is escape. As she grabs the roast with both hands, apparently preparing for the coup de grace, he runs out the back door. The leg of lamb flies out behind him a moment later.

"Oh my God," he mutters to himself as he fumbles his way into his car. "Oh my God."

Flipping on the ignition, he roars into reverse and backs out of the driveway with a screech of his tires.

"Oh my God" is all he can think to say as he jerks the car into gear on the street. "Oh my God."

Pervert? Criminal? Humbert Humbert?

Oh my God.

And welcome to the Bahamas.

Will Ashley come up with a twenty-thousand dollar fundraiser?

Will Tarnish be able to keep his dismay from his students?

Will Brett still go to Belize?

Will Braun ever eat lamb again?

Will Bill Gates stay retired?

**Glue yourself to your sandbox and crouch toward Bethlehem for our next episode:
"Pleats: Folds in your pants, or successor to Yeats?"**