



Episode 90

The Best Part is the Seal of Approval on the Toilet

Forensicians are used to it.

Or at least the ones who travel are used to it.

Throughout the country, there is a network of lodging-for-hire establishments that exists entirely to provide the fewest overnight amenities to the most parsimonious of clientele. These are the motels that not only advertise with pride their low rent status, but often use their cheapness eponymously: "Motel Nineteen Ninety-Nine," or "Bunk and Toilet," or "Chateau Low-dough." Their facilities meet the bottom-line margin of cleanliness, but only barely. As a rule these establishments do not -- at least knowingly -- cater to the ladies of the evening or crack dealers or Saturday-Night-Special salesmen; they are for the legitimate, albeit tight-fisted, guest. The rooms are the size of introductory-offer igloos, with enough space for one double bed covered with a fitted polyester spread and a blanket the thickness of a President's morals, a television that can always be heard from the next room at three a.m. but never seems to be intelligible when it's right in front of you (although at least they always do have HBO, but it is somehow always showing movies that you didn't want to see in the first place but you've sat through three times already), and a bathroom that often, but not always, offers complimentary soap. These motels may exist in major cities, but they are more likely to be found in towns where no one ever has much call to stay in a motel because everybody already lives there and no one ever visits. But it is never true that no one ever visits; there are anvil salesmen, job applicants, relocated business executives, extra relatives that won't fit in the hide-a-bed, and, of course, forensicians. It is the coaches who usually wind up in these establishments, while their students are being housed by the families of the local high school team that is hosting the weekend's event. When students stay in motels, it is usually in larger cities like Miami or New York, with chains like the Holiday Inn or

Enchanted Hunters that offer reasonable enough rates when you shove ten or so forensicians into one room to save a few bucks off the annual team budget.

The motel in Nighthen Township that fits the description of sleep cheap and don't ask too many questions is the Cozy Cot. Located not far from the Veblen Mall, it comprises forty rooms, all identical, in a two-story twenty-long row facing the main town thoroughfare. Seven cars are inevitably parked in front, always of the high-mileage variety with little rust hems around the edges like vehicular crust, never the same cars two days in a row. It is not unusual to spot a motorcycle or two once in a while, and a Domino Pizza delivery vehicle. The Cozy Cot is run by an Indian couple who fulfill all the jobs the motel requires, from desk manager to concierge to housekeeping services to plumbing repair. They understand your English better than you understand theirs, which enables them to take your credit card upon your arrival and accurately calculate the charges during your stay, but not quite understand why you expect them to call you up at some ungodly hour in the morning when you should have known you would have needed your own alarm clock. What do you expect for thirty-nine dollars a night? Ivana Trump putting Godiva chocolates on your pillow every night?

On the top floor of the Cozy Cot, in the first room on the far end, Braun Saxon is lying on top of the bed, mindlessly staring at the television set. Monday Night Football. Braun hates Monday Night Football. Braun hates Saturday afternoon football, Sunday afternoon football, any day of the week, any time of the day football.

He has no idea what he is watching.

And he doesn't care.

He cannot believe that Brett has thrown him out of the house. He has nowhere else to go, so he has come here, to the Cozy Cot. Cozy it isn't. Dingy? Definitely. Liveable? Not very. His room is dark; everything is decorated in brown funk, from the one unsittable chair to the bedspread to the rug to the painting on the wall of a Hudson River landscape. If it is the Hudson River. The Styx would be more inviting.

She found that composition book. Cartier Diamond's composition book. How could Cartier have left it there, buried in the house like that?

Or had she? Something in the back of his mind nudged him that he had found the composition book himself out in the open at one point and hadn't registered it. Maybe he was the one who had put it where Brett could find it.

What an idiot! What has he gotten himself into?

He remembers back to Cartier, and his first meeting with her. She didn't look like any teenager, he remembers that distinctly. And she never acted like any teenager. At least not with him. Brett had been in the Yucatan, leaving him alone once again. He had always been good, mostly, when she wasn't around. But he was human. You couldn't

deny that he was human. And young. And healthy and normal, with all the desires and needs of any healthy normal young human.

Cartier just happened to be a little younger...

At least she was legal. Thank God for that. Seeking companionship outside of marriage is one thing; being a pedophile is something else altogether.

Humbert Humbert? He isn't any Humbert Humbert. He is just, sort of, a louse.

Or is he? Whose fault is it that he is alone so much? Sure, he loves Brett, at least he thought he loved Brett, but she's the one who is always going off to the ruins of this, that or the other civilization. What about their marriage? Shouldn't she attend to that before it becomes ruins too?

Cartier was cute. Maybe too cute. Maybe it was the fact that she was so young that he was attracted to her.

It was a fling, he says to himself. A lousy fling. Marriages are filled with flings. It is the nature of marriage. It is the nature of humanity.

Try to explain that to Brett.

So what is he going to do now? He has no idea. He has tried to call Brett three times tonight, but all he has gotten is the answering machine. He has left his number, but she hasn't called him back. She needs time, but he has no idea how much. He does want to get back together with her. He is sure of that. He is in love with Brett. She is his wife. He is her husband.

Braun, still fully dressed, drifts off to sleep as the game is winding down on the television. He jerks awake with a start. Where is he? What is happening?

And then he remembers.

He gets up from the bed and goes into the bathroom. He has no toiletry articles: no tooth brush, no comb, no razor. But it's late now. He'll get up early and pick that stuff up in the morning, before he goes to work.

He stares at himself in the mirror.

What the hell have you gotten yourself into, he silently asks his morose looking reflection. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?

And Jupiter Aligns with Mars

The school bus lurches forward into the night. There is no moon, there are no stars. No streetlights brighten the road ahead or behind them. There are no other vehicles.

The bus travels on. Trees reach out from the forests on either side of the road as it passes.

Tarnish Jutmoll feels a dizzying sense of nausea. Inside the school bus, every seat is taken. He doesn't recognize all of the students. Some of them may not be his. There is the usual raucous noise of dozens of imprisoned teenagers in motion, but he cannot tell where the noise is coming from, as each of the students is sitting staring forward, their faces blank, their mouths grimly shut.

"Roll call," Tarnish says, trying to find the list of students in his pocket. "We have to do a roll call."

There is no response.

Where is that list?

"Have you seen my attendance sheet?" Tarnish asks the person sitting next to him.

"Klaatu barata nicto," the person responds.

The list is in Tarnish's hand.

"Myra?" he calls out. "Myra Moon?"

There is no response.

"Where's Myra?"

"She's not here," someone replies.

"Where is she?"

"We forgot her. We left her back there. Alone."

"No we didn't," Tarnish insists. "Myra," he calls again. Louder. "Myra." Louder yet. "MYRA!"

"Tarnish! Tarnish! What's the matter?"

He opens his eyes. For an instant he is disoriented. Amnea is lying beside him, gently shaking him awake.

"Oh my God," he whispers.

"What's the matter?"

"I was--" He stops. "I was dreaming."

"I think you were calling out somebody's name."

He nods. "I've had this dream before." He takes a deep breath. "I've had this dream a lot."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

She snuggles against him. "Good."

"Go back to sleep," he whispers. He looks at the dial of clock radio. 3:23.

"You too," she says softly.

Tarnish closes his eyes. Amnea's body is warm and soft against his, but there is only one thought going through his mind.

Myra Moon. Myra Moon. Myra Moon....

Thirty Seconds Remaining

The alarm goes off at six o'clock. For a moment, Tarnish Jutmoll is completely disoriented. Then he remembers last night, and what happened, and where he is.

Amazing, he thinks. He is not thinking about his recurring nightmare. He is thinking about what happened before that. Before he went to sleep.

Amnea is already out of bed and in the shower. Tarnish gets up. Amnea has left him a large white cotton bathrobe. He puts it on. There is a smell of coffee coming from the kitchen. He follows his nose to the source.

It is strange waking up in someone else's house. He cannot remember the last time this happened to him. He is used to waking up in characterless motel rooms, with no company aside from CNN and the rustlings in the hallways of strangers in the endless pursuit of the ice machine. A house, on the other hand, has a personality. As he shuffles around in the kitchen, trying to find the coffee cups, he imagines where he might put them, which is in

this cabinet right here, but Amnea has put rice and pasta there, so the underlying intelligence of the room is different from his own. The underlying intelligence of the whole place is different from his own. That is one of the joys of new relationships, the uncovering of the underlying intelligence.

Tarnish hears footsteps behind him. "I give up," he says, without looking. "Where do you hide the coffee cups?"

There is a brief pause, and then a male voice replies. "Over there. Next to the refrigerator."

Tarnish spins around. "Chesney!"

"Mr. Jutmoll?" Like Tarnish, Chesney is wearing only a bathrobe. Unlike Tarnish, it is Chesney's own bathrobe. Chesney's expression is a mixture of surprise and disbelief.

Tarnish does not know what to say. "I thought you were with your father," he finally manages.

"I was. I had to come home. It's a school day."

Of course. "I didn't hear you come in."

Chesney's eyes narrow. "Is my mother here?"

"She's getting dressed."

Chesney's eyes narrow even further.

Tarnish drops down into a kitchen chair. "Chesney, I don't know what to say. This is very embarrassing."

"Tell me about it." Chesney drops down into the chair next to him.

"Your mother and I..."

"I think I can figure it out, Mr. Jutmoll."

"Yes. I imagine you can."

They sit silently for a moment.

"I was getting coffee," Tarnish finally says.

"Me too."

They both stand up and face each other awkwardly as they inadvertently bar one another's paths. Tarnish steps aside. Chesney wordlessly goes to the cabinet, pulls down two coffee cups, and pours for both of them.

"Milk?"

"No thanks."

"Sugar?"

"No thanks."

They sit down again with the cups in front of them.

"So," Chesney says.

"So."

"What did you think of the Lodestone?"

"Great tournament. You did well."

Chesney nods. "Got the qual. So did Griot, right?"

"Yes."

Some silence.

"Great tournament."

"Great tournament."

Some more silence.

"Are you going to Bede?"

"Oh, yes," Tarnish says. "We always go to Bede."

"We're going to Bede too."

"Good."

"Yes."

Even more silence.

"I've got to get ready for school," Chesney says.

"Me too."

They both stand up again. And again they awkwardly bar the other's path.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Chesney says. This time he steps aside to allow Tarnish to leave the kitchen.

The walk back to the bedroom seems endless. Amnea is brushing her hair when he enters.

"Chesney is here," Tarnish says, standing in the doorway.

"I should hope so," Amnea replies. "He has school today." She looks over at Tarnish, her expression mischievous. "I gather you ran into him, then?"

"Oh yes. He and I just had a wonderful conversation."

"You'll have to get used to him, Tarnish. He's my son."

"I think we both could have used a little more preparation."

She shrugs. "Sometimes life doesn't give you any prep time." She goes back to brushing her hair, and Tarnish goes into the bathroom.

Sometimes life doesn't give you any prep time.

Yep.

Will Braun and Brett get back together?

Will Tarnish ever forget Myra Moon?

Will Chesney start calling Tarnish "Popsy"?

Will Palin hire Fey as a decoy?

Is there any more pudding?

Poke your nose fruitlessly into our next episode: "Onophobic Oenophile, or, No Matter How Many Glasses of Wine You Drink, You Still Hate Yoko."