



Episode 97

The Road to Blessed Moly

Most people go home after school. Most of them didn't want to be in school in the first place, and now that the day is done, they are out the door heading toward the buses in a stampede that warm the heart of any buffalo. Woe to the poor student who trips and falls on his way to the yellow ships of freedom: there will be nothing left of him but a broken pencil, a doodle-filled composition book, and a quart of ghee representing his entire organic being.

But some people stay. The athletes, of course, are the greatest number. They do not stay because they are so enamored of school that they cannot get enough of it, but because ever since their first walk through the halls of academe they have celebrated exiting those halls by getting together after school and playing. After kindergarten they played tag or hide-and-seek or catch. Over the years their activities evolved into more organized patterns, but it is still playing. After all, what is football but tag, hide-and-seek and catch jumbled together into one mushy stew with shoulder pads and protective cups? One way or the other, the same is true of baseball, track, tennis, field hockey -- you name it, it is kids playing after school, and not kids doing their homework and committing to memory the periodic table of the elements or The Rime of the Ancient Mariner or the conjugation of the Latin verb sum.

Other people stay too. Some schools have complex prison systems referred to simply as detention, where miscreants while away the hours staring out the windows and serving out their terms, carving notches in the desks to mark the passage of time. Some students stay behind to meet with teachers, for tutoring or to obsequiously chalk up some extra credits; this little army of Uriah Heeps tops everyone's list of annoying humans, including the teachers' (except for the former Uriah Heeps among that august number). No one likes a suck-up, not even the suck-upees.

Finally there are the non-athletic extracurricular types. The yearbook staff (English majors who like to write humorous photo captions), the Student Organization (the Future Babbitts of America League, who only do it because it's little or no work and looks good on their resume for college), the drama club (two of whom can sing, which does not deter the rest of them from mounting this year's production of Gotterdammerung), the computer club (free and fast Internet access -- 'nuff said?), the chess club (people

considered too geeky to join the computer club, who will major in finance in college and get MBAs and spend the rest of their lives hiring and firing the athletes, detentionees, suck-ups, English majors, boosters, actors and computer geeks while living off their options and driving top-of-the-line German roadsters that they trade in every year, or when the windshield fluid needs replacing, whichever comes first).

Which leaves the Forensicians, who are not necessarily excluded from any of the above groups, and who indeed dabble hither and yon among them, but if you wake them up in the middle of the night and put a knife to their throats and ask them what they are, they will inevitably answer Forensician (or Debater, or Speechie, whichever comes first into their still sleeping little heads). Forensicians are a hybrid group of semi-academics whose activity does not relate directly to academics, but which nonetheless occupies a special place in the hearts of teachers. Forensics is tonier than most activities, and there is a presumption that forensicians might actually possess some overflow brain capabilities. This presumption, of course, is erroneous, as least as it pertains to the group as a whole, although it is certainly true of certain individuals among them. But then again, it is also certainly true of certain football players and detentionees and so forth and so on, but they don't get the good odor, and forensicians do.

Not a bad deal, if you think about it. Where do I sign up for Declamation?

At Nighten Day School, Tarnish Jutmoll is distractedly greeting his Speechies as they assemble after school for their meeting. Tarnish is sitting behind his desk with a bemused grin, nodding gently as the troops assemble. He is as happy as he has been in years, and that happiness has nothing to do with school or Speechies.

He will be meeting Amnea again tonight for dinner. At her place.

Aaaahhhh....

"Can I have a ride home after the meeting, Cartier?" Mordred Prentice is asking as he trails Cartier Diamond into the classroom.

"I always give you a ride home," she purrs, taking a seat next to the window.

"I just want to make sure," Mordred says. He plops down in the seat behind her.

Tarnish watches them, trying yet again to understand their relationship. Wherever there is Cartier, there seems to be Mordred, but there is certainly nothing romantic between the blonde ice queen and the chubby little red-faced sophomore. And after a year on the team, Mordred has yet to participate in even one event.

"Do you have a piece ready for today, Mr. Prentice?" Tarnish asks him, strolling over toward Mordred's desk. There is a lilt to Tarnish's stride, and his crabbish limp is barely noticeable.

"Uh, not really, Mr. Jutmoll." Mordred casts his eyes down on the desktop in front of him.

"What kind of piece is it?"

"What kind of piece?"

"Yes. What kind? You know, drama, prose, poetry, humor. Whatever."

"I'm not sure yet. It's sort of, like, you know--"

"I'm working on it with him, Mr. Jutmoll," Cartier interrupts. "We should have something ready soon."

Tarnish looks into those deep violet eyes. He realizes it is no good arguing. "You look pleased with yourself today, Cartier."

She raises an eyebrow. "I am pleased with myself."

"Good school day?"

She momentarily furrows her brow. "Good school night," she replies cryptically.

Tarnish lets it go.

The last students have straggled in through the door, and Tarnish decides it is time to begin.

"So," he asks, "is everybody ready for their last big event?"

The faces that stare up at him are uniformly blank.

"Come on, people. The Blessed Moly is going to be our valedictory tournament. Let's make it our best tournament ever."

"We're still not getting any money?" William Hand asks.

Tarnish shakes his head. "I wasn't merely presenting a tentative scenario, William. The Nighten Day team is finished. Caput. Broke. There is not enough money to fix it, nor is there going to be enough money any time in the future."

"In other words, deal with it," David Brillig chimes in. He is sitting on the opposite side of the room from William Hand.

Tarnish nods. "In other words, deal with it. All right." He looks at David, then looks around the room. "Where is Kumar? I wanted to hear your Duo today."

"He's got the flu," David says.

"The flu? Not just a cold?"

"Definitely the flu. I talked to his mother on the phone last night. He's going to be out for the rest of the week." David sighs. "So much for our Duo."

"You can work on it when he feels better again."

"Next week? Work on a Duo piece maybe three times before participating in your last tournament ever?" David slaps his hand on the desk top in anger. "That really sucks, Mr. Jutmoll. That really sucks."

Tarnish is standing in the front of the room. David's frustration is a palpable presence, and Tarnish can understand the depth of it. A kid who has defined himself as a Speechie for four years will now be deprived of a reasonable entry in his very last tournament.

Tarnish looks over at William on the other side of the room. William and David, the greatest Duo team Tarnish has ever fielded, are a team no longer. As a rule, Tarnish would not interfere with the machinations of adolescent relationships. Over the years he has seen kids come together and go apart, and he has seldom known the reasons why, much less questioned those reasons. But going into their last tournament, David will have nothing but a second-rate prose-poetry combo that his heart simply isn't in, while both William's prose-poetry and dramatic interp piece are adequate, but nothing like his best work with David. The two need another person to work with. They are far from bad alone, but with a partner their synergy is electric. And for three years, only until a few weeks ago, the synergy between David and William was among the best in the country.

"I don't usually do this," Tarnish says, "but I am going to do it now." He points at David. "You," he says, "are going to do a Duo. And--" his finger moves across the room to point-- "you are going to do it with William."

"But--" David begins.

"There are no buts!" Tarnish's voice is firm. "This is a one-time, take-it-or-leave-it offer. Both of you. You are doing a Duo at the Moly. You are starting to work on it tonight, and you will have it ready by next Saturday. Or else you are leaving this room immediately, and that will be the end of Speech for both of you."

Both William and David are staring at Tarnish, as if in fear of looking at one another. William is the first to break off eye contact.

"It's all right by me," he says. He looks over at David.

A long minute passes.

"It's all right by me," David echoes.

"Fine," Tarnish says, feeling satisfied with himself. "So what else is on the agenda?"

Ashley Ambrose raises her hand. She is smiling, but Tarnish has long ago come to realize that Ashley Ambrose would smile through Armageddon.

"Ashley?"

"I've written a new piece," she says. "I finished it last night, although it still needs some polishing."

"Oh?"

"If I have to go out, I want to go out with a bang."

"What is the piece?" Tarnish asks.

"It's called Finances," she says, popping out of her chair unbidden. She walks to the front of the room. "I've memorized most of it, but I'll still need to refer to it occasionally."

Tarnish nods. There is obviously no stopping her. "Let 'er rip," he says.

"Finances!" Ashley's head slowly turns as she tosses her smile at everyone in the room. "Finances, finances, finances..."

Finances are always the problem. From the day we are born, it is always a question of money. Do we have food for the baby? Do we have a crib to put her in? Do we have a stroller that will last until she can walk on her own two feet?

It is always a question of finances.

We give our children allowances, as soon as they are able to understand the concept of money. Maybe it's a nickel or a dime, but it is theirs to spend as they see fit. We want our children to learn the value of a dollar, and how long it takes to earn that dollar, and what a dollar can buy and what it can't buy.

We want our children to learn about finances.

And why? Because we want our children to learn everything. To learn how to live. To learn to be smart, and clever, and to make the most out of life. But they have to understand that finances are limited, and that they can't have everything. They can't learn everything. They can't be as smart or as clever or make as much out of life as we would want. Everyone has to make choices. We can't do everything. We can only do some things. We can't afford everything. We can only afford some things.

Because of finances.

As Ashley talks her smile never wavers. She continues to work the room with her eyes. Tarnish tries to concentrate on what she is saying rather than how she is saying it. Before long he realizes that her piece is not about money in general, but the fiscal problems of the Nighten Day team in particular.

They spend their money on their own selfish wants. They buy the latest Jeep Cherokee, the biggest home entertainment system, the newest golf clubs. They eat at the best restaurants as often as they can, while all around them the homeless are starving.

Ashley has, to put it mildly, expressed a lot of vituperation in her new Original Oratory. She accuses every adult in Nighten Township of virtually criminal selfishness, ultimately at the expense of their own children.

The extracurricular programs that make responsible, capable adults out of the raw material of adolescents are the first thing to go. Say goodbye to the drama club that allows us to express our innermost selves, say goodbye to the sports teams that invigorate the body to match the vigorous mind, and say goodbye to the Speech and Debate Team, where the intellect is the greatest stretched.

The greatest stretched?

The overest wrought?

But Ashley's piece is certainly heartfelt, and when she finishes, blaming the realignment of the Nighten Day budget for the fall and decline of the entire Western civilization, she gets a resounding burst of applause from her audience.

Tarnish joins in. There is no point in trying to redirect her. Let her go out in a blaze of glory. Who knows? Maybe she'll even win with it.

Stranger things have happened.

The Road to Buglaroni

"Hey you!"

Buglaroni lifts his eyes from the pavement.

"Yeah, you. Bugarooni."

The bus has dropped Buglaroni off at the corner of his street. He has to walk to the end to get home.

And he has to walk past Bark Santorelli.

Bark is leaning against his rusted Buick, smoking a cigarette. He is wearing black jeans and a black leather jacket, and with his long black hair and the three gold rings in his right ear plus the imbalanced one in his left ear, he looks like an escapee from the set of Grease with a stop-off on the way to a Jackie Chan film.

"Oh," Buglaroni says. "Hello."

Bark flips his cigarette Buglaroni's direction. Buglaroni dances out of the line of fire.

"We gotta talk, Bug Boy."

"It's Buglaroni."

"No, it's Bug Boy." Bark takes a couple of steps in Buglaroni's direction. "Come here, Bug Boy."

Buglaroni doesn't move.

"I said, come here!"

Buglaroni takes a tentative step forward.

"Closer."

Another step. His face is now a foot away from Bark's.

"We gotta have an understanding, you and me, Bug Boy."

"An understanding?"

Bark reaches out with his left hand and grabs the front of Buglaroni's windbreaker. "An understanding, Bug Boy."

Buglaroni can feel the juices flowing biliously in his stomach.

"You freakin' stay away from Gloria, Bug Boy. You understand me?"

"But we're going out," Buglaroni manages to say.

Bark's eyes widen. "You're freakin' goin' out? Is that what you think, Bug Boy? You're freakin' goin' out?"

Bark's right hand comes up from nowhere and slaps Buglaroni hard across the face, then he lets go with his left hand. Buglaroni crumbles to the ground.

"You freakin' wimp." Bark spits. "Bug Boy."

Buglaroni is on his knees in front of Bark. Bark pulls him up again and lets go, then reaches back and punches Buglaroni hard in the mouth. Buglaroni falls on his back on the street.

"You gonna fight, Bug Boy? Or you just gonna freakin' lie there?"

Buglaroni doesn't move. Tears are forming in his eyes.

"You gonna cry, Bug Boy?" Bark asks, dropping to his knees beside Buglaroni's supine body. "Get up. Come on. Get up."

Somehow Buglaroni pulls himself to his feet. His lip is cut and bleeding.

"One more for the freakin' road," Bark says as he hauls back and lands another punch, this time a left to the side of Buglaroni's head. Somehow Buglaroni manages to stay on his feet.

Bark saunters back to his car. As he opens the door, he looks over at Buglaroni, who is standing dazed in the middle of the road.

"Next time I won't be so nice, Bug Boy."

Bark gets into his car and flips on the engine, then slowly rolls off.

Buglaroni watches the car disappear out on the main road.

Faint heart ne'er won fair maiden, he thinks, as he falls to his knees and begins to retch.

The Road to the COC

Time: 11:14:57 -0500 (GMT)

From: "G.S. Pattersong" <gspatter@pop.ukelele.edu>

Subject: COC QUALIFIERS: BADLANDS AND CORONADO

THE ROAD TO THE COMBAT OF CONQUERORS BEGINS

(SATURDAY, SUNDAY, AND MONDAY, MAY 1,2 AND 3)

BRING YOUR OWN MOON PIES

Tournament Hotel: The Marley Chain

Tournament Snackfood: Skittles

Tournament Outfitters: Lauren Polopony

Tournament Vehicle: Yugo

Tournament Restaurant: Chinese Takeout

Tournament Enema: Fleet

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BADLANDS UNIVERSITY

Prof. Jum Pugly, Director of the Hole-in-the-Wall Debates at Badlands University, has certified the 1999 COC Qualifiers. Badlands is a COC Qualifier in Policy Debate at the Octa-Finals level.

POLICY

Philomena Pettigrew and Voluptinia Boynken - Head Trip, CA
Cloakus McGuirker and Bella Bellbell - Peatmoss, NM
Barnabus Blusternoph and Rogan Josh - Lexluthor, MA
Dirk L. Pernicious and Tippitoes Malaprop - Barber College Prep, CA
Baskin and Robbins - George Bernard Shaw, IL
Erhardt Luftwaffemachen and Julio Joop - George Bernard Shaw, IL
Pap Spinachspoon and Leung Ago - Collage Prep, IL
Mordecai de Chevre and Sven Oleo - East Linens, MI
Horrowfonken Bloot and Straussens Waltzen - East Linens, MI
Mick and Ernie McInerney - Old Giveitup, IL
Thronk Fallow and his chorus and orchestra - Pants, TX
Thegre Atgat Sby and Tende Risth Enight - Bellaryourown, CA
Penumbra Brightonian and Salman Spawnin - George Bernard Shaw, IL

Oop Brzsynkfmkwi and Joe a la King - Brophy, AZ
Dermis Pffinchster and Auld Ascii - El Burrito, CA
Flit Zinger and Mano Amano - Head Cold, CA

UNIVERSITY OF CORONADO

Michelin Threestars, director of the University of Coronado Invitational, has certified the 1999 COC qualifiers in Policy Debate. Coronado is a qualifier in Policy at the Finals level.

POLICY

Ian Out and Peechy Keen -- Jesuit Inquisitor Preparatory , TX
Tuckenin Shirtails and Brimly Ornfator -- Uppada Creek High School, CO

Sincerely,

G.S. Pattersong

COC Director

Will Mordred ever come up with a piece of his own?

Will William and David be able to work together after all the bad blood between them?

Will Ashley wipe that confounded smile off her face?

Will Buglaroni wipe that confounded blood off his face?

You don't know Jack in our next episode: "Capricorn: Sign of the goat or dumb Italian jokes?"