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After a purposefully slow and reflective start to “The Sopranos” last week that focused almost entirely on Tony, Carmela, Bobby, and Janice, this week’s episode was much more frantically paced. Almost all of the characters are seen at one time or another, with plot advancements for each one of them.

If we viewers started getting just a touch of ill foreboding last week, it was certainly ratcheted up several notches this week. In many ways, David Chase is signifying that the end of the road is apparent. Three predominate storylines were followed this week lamenting the passage of time for three leaders; Tony, Johnny Sack, and Phil Leotardo.

Recap

This episode probably jumped from scene to scene more than any other that I can recall, making a normal recap of the show nearly impossible. Instead, I’ll break it into the three main segments; Johnny Sack’s illness, the power play for leadership of the New York Mob, and the upcoming theatrical release of Christopher’s movie “Cleaver”.

Buh-bye, Johnny Sack

The last time Johnny Sack was seen, it was last season when he agreed to the plea bargain deal that gave him a 15 year sentence. Phil cursed at the television as he watched it, saying "I hope he dies in there". Boy, that's some strong voodoo from Phil, because when we first see Johnny this time, he's looking like a man who has been undergoing chemotherapy. Sure enough, he has Stage 4 lung cancer…and the doctor tells him there is no Stage 5 (although the title of this week's episode would beg to differ). Dr. Rosen gives him three months to live at the most, and I immediately start trying to do the math and try to figure out if he'll be able to make it through the season or not. Yes, I know…sometimes I can be a real idiot.

We get a couple of family scenes with Johnny's wife Ginny and daughter Allegra, which is simultaneously touching, disturbing, and funny in a really sick way, laughing at how Ginny is still the most clueless woman in the show (which is really saying something). Johnny also befriends an orderly at the prison hospital named Warren. As it turns out, Warren knows a thing or three about cancer as he was a noted oncologist before he murdered his wife, her aunt, and the mailman. Famed director Sydney Pollack does a great job in portraying the unapologetically deadpan murderer, who is star struck to be near a famed mafia boss ("I also killed the mailman. By then, I was fully committed"). He gives Johnny a second opinion on his condition, telling him he could live another two or three years. Good thing Dr. Warren doesn't have to worry about being sued for malpractice anymore, although I'm sure there would probably be more than one ambulance chasing scumbucket…er…lawyer that would try.

As it turns out, both of the doctors were wildly optimistic. Eventually, even Warren looks at Johnny's chart, and tells him that he was wrong, and he hasn't much time. One last hospital bed scene with Ginny, Allegra, and some 12 year old boy…no, wait, that's the Sacrimoni's other daughter, the bulimic one, now sporting a chopped off haircut. Ginny's last words to Johnny before he died were to offer him a cigarette…which struck me as strangely ironic.

A Power Play That's Almost As Vicious As Presidential Politics

Now that we know that Johnny Sack's condition makes it impossible for him to have any involvement from behind bars, a la Al Capone, what's going on with the leadership on the New York crew?

At the screening of “Cleaver” (discussed in detail later), Tony chats up Phil, telling him to get the family back into shape now that Phil has recovered from his heart attack. But Phil doesn’t really want to be the boss anymore. Hell, the way he and Tony were talking about their ailments, I thought it was going to be a repeat of the old routine Billy Crystal did on SNL, as the old security guard always whining about what hurt “have you ever had a meat thermometer shoved into your temple? Oy! Does **that** hurt!”

Phil seems to think that it will be his former protégé Gerry Torciano that will take over, while other talking head “mafia experts” on a “Geraldo” show also argue for Doc Santoro or Little Carmine. I could have sworn that they also weighed in on Imus, but perhaps that’s just the overkill still affecting me.

I still really don’t have any clue as to who Gerry is, but maybe I can get a better idea during his dinner with Silvio. Then again, I’m not paying much attention to either of them, when their hot, hot rented “dates” for the evening show back up to the table and they sit down for their dinner. Sil is shown talking, and then I’m thinking that the sound has screwed up off my satellite, as his lips are moving but no sound is coming out. And then half of his face is splattered, and I’m thinking “Food fight at an Italian Restaurant! Kewl!” But no, it’s not tomato sauce, it’s Gerry-sauce as Doc ordered a prescription of several grams of lead to cure Gerry’s wanton ambition.

Damn…I didn’t even have Gerry on my Whacking Odds List. Who was he again?

Therefore, when we next see Tony meeting up with Little Carmine, I’m assuming Tony is there to throw his support to the King of Malapropism. Tony is doing just that, but it looks like Carmine is falling just as hard for the celebrity life as Christafuh. He says that he totally enjoys things the way they are, and has no desire for the stress and responsibilities that would come with the position. He failed to mention that the job also comes with a high probability of either prison or a gruesome whacking…two things that tend to send up red flags when they are mentioned on any job description I’ve ever ran across.

So by default, I would normally guess that the role will go to Doc. But I just can't see that happening…Chase just wouldn't give that much responsibility to someone who has seen so little screen time up until now. Not to worry, fans, because methinks Phil (aka "Cranky F#@%") is about to go Mafioso Howard Beal on everyone, as he's mad as hell, and he's not going to take it any more.

At a party at his social club to celebrate what would have been his brother Billy's 47th birthday (only a week after Tony's 47th birthday…nice touch), Phil is on a major rant about everything that pisses him off. The fact that the immigration officials at Ellis Island changed the spelling of the family name from "Leonardo" to "Leotardo"…the fact that he kept quiet during his eight year prison sentence…that he didn't do more to avenge his brother's death at the hands of Tony Blundetto…that all the hair gel require for his helmet head really leaves his scalp red and scratch. Phil's just one P.O'd C.F. and he vows "no more of this". The scene really needed some ominous organ music at that point.

A Movie That Would Certainly Get a Spergeon Wynn From Me

Going back now to the actual beginning of the show, we see one of the twenty or so Baldwin Brothers chewing up scenery in a garage. Of course, we all know that this is the infamous movie "Cleaver" we are seeing, although I still could have done without the view of the one guy's opened intestines. Things just get more Robert Rodriguez-ish as Mike, the "hero", comes out of the trunk of the car, both hands chopped off and a meat cleaver inserted into the stump of his right arm. After "Sally Boy" (Baldwin v3.8) futilely empties his clip into the undead title character, said meat cleaver gets applied to his skull…several times. Let's go eat!

Nice segue to dinner at Casa de Mafia, as the Sopranos talk about the upcoming premier party. Carmela's question to Meadow regarding a date for the shindig is scoffed at, as Meadow currently thinks all men are scum, coming off from her break up with Finn. Here's a hint, Meadow; next time, check to see if the guy has a pulse before you agree to date him. Blanca chimes in with a "tell me about it" dig at AJ, who has no idea why she's pissed at him. Neither

do we, but we're all sure it's for a good reason, you worthless bum.

The next morning, Tony is getting his traditional morning paper in his traditional robe with his traditional disheveled hair when FBI Agents Harris and Goddard pull up to talk to him. Seems that since Chris turned out to be worthless as an informant to their efforts in counter-terrorism, they are now trying to recruit Tony. Naturally, T declines their offer; but I get the feeling this was not a throw-away scene, and this may end up being one possible "out" for Tony later on…as his help in breaking a major terrorist plot may clear him of any RICO charges.

A premier of a slasher film called "Cleaver" being held at a former meat processing building…how quaint! (But I guess it's better than having the premier of "Brokeback Mountain" at a former meat packing plant. OK…yeah, I did just go there…sorry, couldn't resist…that's what I get for leaving my Sopranos notes out when I watch "Entourage" immediately following The Sopranos…I start channeling Turtle). They start out with a hysterical introduction session where Carmine butchers the English language once again worse than Mike the Cleaver could ever carve up a human being. Chris then has a few words, thanking his investors, and mostly Tony…and totally ignoring both J.T. and the director, who has the microphone removed from right in front of him just as he's trying to say a few words.

Two additional scenes were shown to us during that segment; one has Sally Boy in a basement in an opened white bathrobe over a wife-beater t-shirt and boxer shorts freaking out at a couple of gangsters and throwing a jar of nails against the wall. The other has Sally Boy seducing "Mike's" fiancé…gaining a major "did you see THAT" look from Ro to Carmela. Subtlety, thy name is not Christafuh. Tony pooh-poohs Carmela's contention that the scene was Chris's dig at Tony due to Chris's belief that Tony once slept with Adriana.

Lest we forget, Adriana now sleeps with the fishes, and the scene only serves to open that wound back up with Carmela, who gives Chris all kinds of hell when she's talking to Chris after babysitting for him. Chris denies everything, of course; the "revenge fantasy" aspect of the movie and any foul play in Adriana's disappearance. Now slightly concerned about what Tony is thinking, Chris does what any responsible man would do; he runs over to J.T.'s place, and tells him to go to Tony and insist that the "fiancé scene" was his idea. When J.T. argues that it was Chris's idea, Chris wins the debate by hitting J.T. over the head with an award J.T. once received. Looks like we have a new Bud Light commercial. "I hit you with logic and the truth!"

"I hit you with a ten pound blunt object…I win."

So J.T. heads down to the Bing…the second time tonight we've got to see some silicone in the background, and tells Tony that he drew his inspiration for Sally Boy from Broderick Crawford in "Born Yesterday". And Tony gives him a look that says, "you think **I** was born yesterday, you idiot?"

Next thing we see is Tony watching part of the old movie, and I'm thinking he's sitting at home, and he's about to be really pissed. But no, he's sitting in Melfi's office, venting about his frustration concerning how much he thinks Chris hates him. Great job by James Gandolfini in this scene. He does a fantastic job showing all the frustration, anger, and pain Tony is feeling. I think Tony is even more frustrated due to what happened last week. Prior to the blow-up, he was of the opinion that perhaps Bobby Bacala could step up as the next boss. But after seeing how Bobby is (a) hopelessly manipulated by Janice and (b) dumb as a box of rocks, Tony doesn't really know what he should do.

In the end, we get a very Godfather-esque scene. Jumping back and forth from Phil's final "no more" scene is one with Tony and Carmela at the church for the christening ceremony for Chris and Kelli's baby. In the end Tony, who will be the baby's godfather, tightly embraces Chris.

Is it perhaps Tony's effort to build a bridge back between them? For me, I was thinking "war is coming." And it might just be Civil War first. Phil needs to take care of Doc, and Tony has some hard choices ahead for him as well. But all will lead up to the inevitable New Jersey/New York showdown.

Best Line: Chris: "F@&# Ben Kingsley. Danny Baldwin took him to F^%#ing acting school". Yeah, Chris…and Derek Anderson took Otto Graham to effing QB school.

Best Scene: As is often the case, it's Tony's tearful exhibition of the hurt he's enduring from Chris in Dr. Melfi's office.

Latest Whacking Odds. Missed on the Gerrywacking. Several changes based upon this week's episode and the previews for next week (I never learn).

1) Doc (odds – 1:2) – Phil cannot let the whacking of his former protégé go unpunished.

2) Paulie (odds – even) – I know I shouldn't base anything off from the previews, but I've been certain for a long, long time that Paulie would not survive the series. It looks like the cops/feds find a body somewhere, and it's Paulie's mess. He's going down.

3) Uncle JuniorMummyHead (odds – 2:1) – Looks like the delusional old fart is going off his meds next week. This will not end well.

4) Phil (odds – 2:1) – It won't happen until the end of the season, but it's either him or Tony.

5) Chris: (odds – 6:1) – Don't know how this one will shake out. It's not looking good for Christafuh right at the moment, but we all know how quickly Tony can change. Prime candidate at this point for the esteemed position of "person killed in the next-to-last episode."

6) Bobby: (odds – 8:1) – If Phil decides to go after a member of Tony's family, Bobby would probably be the prime target now.

7) AJ (odds – 10:1) – Could set off one hell of a war.

8) Tony (odds – 20:1) – I think the odds off Tony's final checkout will become less favorable towards him as we go. Don't discount the possibility of him getting the feds to drop charges in exchange for his help on busting terrorists.