I'm in New York on business this week, so I still have The Sopranos and 24 waiting for me at home back in CTown on Tivo. So I'm posting this column blind as to not ruin the surprises of watching both shows. I can do that with Mitch, as he is a helluva writer. I don't think I've ever had to edit one word of anything he's ever written for us in the last 18 months. Of course, this will probably be the column where he drops 15 F Bombs and insults my mother. Mitch recaps this week's episode of The Sopranos.

Ever since I started writing this column last season, I have been pretty merciless on AJ, ripping him left and right for being the whiny, self-absorbed, clueless slacker that he is. But even so, things changed the instant he put that plastic bag over his head, and I was hoping it wouldn't turn out the way it looked like it was going to.

But few things ever do work out exactly like you think they will in this show (after all, it's not the constantly predictable "24"), and this was another excellent episode, albeit one that left you longing for anything to erase the downer mood permeating this hour. Good thing "Entourage" had a classically funny episode right afterwards to break the funk.

Recap

AJ wakes up, still depressed, so he puts on that song that Weird Al parodied in "White and Nerdy"…and I'm suddenly hearing Weird Al's version in my mind, seeing Donny Osmond dancing around in my head like he does in the video. I

need a drink. Or several. The noise (AJ's music, not the screaming from me for a shot), wakes Tony, and he stumbles down the stairs, and half-heartedly apologizes to Carmela for having to go out to Vegas so abruptly to "take care of Christopher's business". Yeah…the "business" was named Sonya, and Tony took real good care of her. Tony makes it up to Carmela in the time honored tradition; giving her something really expensive (a watch). As Carmela once again turns a blind eye to the obvious, we discover that what happens in Vegas (sluts and drugs) truly does stay in Vegas. I somehow don't think the Las Vegas Tourism Board will be using this as part of their next advertising campaign.

AJ's visit to Dr. Vogel reveals that the kid is still a complete mess. He's upset about the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict. He's upset that his parents are so rich and clueless. He's upset still about the beat down his junior mafia buddies gave that Somali bicyclist. And he's really upset that Vince Carter blew chunks in the playoffs for the local New Jersey Nets. "Why can't I ever catch a break?" See…he even sounds like Vince Carter. It seems the only thing from school that interests AJ is a sudden fascination with Yeats' morbidly apocalyptic poem " The Second Coming ", with such uplifting words as "What rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born." Wow…all I need is to be reading that while listening to REM's "Everybody Hurts" with the 10,000th replay of John Elway and "The Drive" playing in the background. After that, there is absolutely no way my day can go anywhere but up.

Tony shows up at the office of the Pork Store for the first time since his trip, where Sil is reading "How to Clean Practically Anything". I wonder if he's worn out the chapter on how to get blood stains and brain matter out of his wig. Tony fills everyone in on the hot chick he was banging out in Vegas (leaving out the

little detail of her being a former Christopher conquest), and his peyote experiment. That gets the other guys talking about their "wild and crazy days", with the guy that played Sgt. Guarnere in "Band of Brothers" talking about his ecstasy experiment, and Paulie yammering about having once mistakenly taken LSD. That might explain the hair. But the boys' eyes glaze over when Tony starts getting all philosophical about his experiences…after all, this group isn't exactly the Algonquin Round Table

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The time at the Pork Store also includes another meeting with Agents Goddard and Harris, where Tony identifies the two maybe-terrorists' photographs. And once again, that's about it. "Next time we'll wear party hats". I get the feeling Chase will end up treating this story line like "24" did with Charles Logan…we'll never, ever know.

The guys still have their problem with the dumping, so Bobby, Sil, and Tony head over to Phil's Social Club to once again try to negotiate a compromise so that they can stop dumping in the Meadowlands, which will probably be another excuse Vince Carter uses for his

horrid play. And maybe all the toxic waste might also help explain Mikki Moore. But Phil will not budge from his insistence upon receiving 25% of the take, despite Tony's pleas to remember what they talked about when Phil was first recovering from his heart attack. Phil bitches about all he missed while being in prison for 20 years, insisting his days of compromise are over. He also had some comments about having real sex now instead of just jerking off like he did in the pen, but by that time my hands were over my ears, and I was saying "la-la-la-la-la"

Tony's reaction is sure to not smooth over the water. He has Silvio pull Phil's no-show jobs at the construction site in New Jersey, which results in the poor foreman getting his ass kicked by Butch and Coco.

Back at Casa de Morose Slacker, AJ is still being Mr. Sunshine, even while Tony and Carmela are

hosting Kelli and the baby for dinner. As AJ moans about something or another, and Tony chastises him for being such a dick in front of company. “Just go ahead and bury your head in the sand!” AJ exclaims. “How about I bury yours into the f@$%ing wall?” Tony responds. OK, Chase now owes my family some money, as I’m pretty sure my father had a copyright on that particular phrase.

But it’s gotten so bad with AJ that he’s now ragging on to Meadow about “Borat”, claiming it’s all just so much exploitation. I’m not sure what was being exploited in the ten minute naked male wrestling scene, except for my gag reflex, but that’s beside the point. Meadow finds out that AJ has dropped out of college, and is depressing himself even more by reading the Al Jazeera web site. You want real depression from a web site? Try reading a Browns bulletin board a couple hours after a loss to Pittspuke.

So AJ decides to handle it in the same mature, rational manner he's utilized pretty much his entire twenty years of life…by putting a plastic back over his head, tying a cement block to his ankle, and jumping into the deep end of the pool. Nice touch, as the swimming pool has always been a metaphor for life for Tony…the spot where he first nurtured the family of ducks in Season One, and the spot where he and Carmela consummated their reconciliation after the separation. But AJ's survival instinct finally kicks in, and he struggles to get out. Luckily, the rope is too long, and he is able to surface. But he can't get to the side, and is treading water, hanging on desperately to the diving board as Tony pulls in and hears his cries for help. Tony jumps into the water and pulls AJ out, screaming "What the Hell is wrong with you!?!" But just a few seconds later, he is cradling the confused, sobbing boy's head in his lap, telling him that "you're all right…"

Great, great scene, and I defy even the biggest AJ haters to tell me they weren't hoping for him to be saved (I know I was). Also another fantastic job by the writers, and by James Gandolfini in conveying the raw, mixed emotions a person goes through when dealing with a difficult child.

After AJ is checked into a mental hospital, the reactions from Tony and Carmela are also quite realistic given their personalities. They alternate blaming themselves, and blaming each other. "I am intimately familiar with The Soprano Curse", Carmela snarks at Tony, and in the ensuing argument, she takes off her "payment for looking the other way when your husband boinks a twenty-something" watch and throws it at Tony.

Another episode with multiple Melfi sightings. The first one is right after AJ has been committed. Tony, as usual, is oscillating all over the place, between being angry at AJ/Carmela/his mother/the world, to being genuinely upset that his son is hurting so bad, and blaming himself for it. Melfi wonders if the attempt wasn't serious at all, just a "cry for help" as AJ might have intentionally made sure that the rope was too long. Tony's response? "He could just be a f@$%ing idiot. Historically, it's been the case." Ouch. After that session, Melfi met with her own therapist, the extremely passive/aggressive Elliot, who told her of a study he'd read that concluded that talk therapy with sociopaths did not help them…in fact, it ended up making the criminals BETTER con men as they could practice their lying with the therapist. Yep…nothing like being told that years of work has been totally wasted and a joke…that'll be $400, please.

We actually get to see Meadow for more than just the obligatory two minutes this week. She's in New York, with her "mystery date", who turns out to be Patrick Parisi. While they're in a restaurant, an inebriated Coco sees them, and comes up making some veiled threats, and not veiled sexual innuendoes. Meadow later relates the story of Coco to Carmela, along with admitting her involvement with Patrick, and her intention of going to law school and not medical school. When Carm prompts her to relate the story about Coco to Tony, you can see the blood boiling behind his eyes, regardless of how cool he tried to be in front of his wife and daughter.

So everyone knew what was coming next…Tony at Coco's restaurant, pulling a gun on Butch to keep him in his place while Tony put the biggest beat down we've seen on "The

Sopranos" since Phil and the boys nearly killed Benny. This one might have been worse, as Tony ends up doing a curb stomp on Coco's head, sending teeth flying everywhere (including into a cuff of Tony's pants, which he later discovers during a therapy session with Carm, AJ, and Dr. Vogel).

During that same session, AJ decides to pull out the Complete Victim Card, and talked about how it was all due to him getting his ass kicked in second grade due to some stupid raincoat Carmela made him wear. I'll swear, Chase really needs to start paying some damn royalty money for stealing lines formerly used by my son when HE went through that stage (luckily, no swimming pool).

One thing AJ did say that threw Tony for a loop was a line used by the biggest manipulator in this entire series, Livia, who told the little psycho “It’s all a big nothing…life.” Well, thank you, GrammieDearest. Tony relates this information to Melfi, along with a very interesting analogy about women being like busses. They drop their children off into the world and go about to their next stop, while the child spends his whole life pursuing her. And somewhere, I see Freud’s Ghost shaking his head and saying, “what a crock of shit.” But at least Tony does seem to be a little more up key. He relates his peyote experiment to Melfi, and in a twist on the central theme for this season, he tells her, “All I can say is…THIS…is not all there is”.

Quite the breakthrough, but we don’t have time for all of that, because this is, after all, a mob

drama. And after the Coco maiming, Carmine visits Tony to tell him that the timing was bad. OK, Captain Malaprop tells it so much better than I: “we stand at the precipice of a crossroads”. The man is a poetic genius. In any case, he tells Tony that they need to visit Phil, and Tony needs to be apologetic. Tony reluctantly agrees, but when he and Carmine get to Phil’s house, Butch refuses to let them in, saying Phil had changed his mind. As they walk away, Phil is yelling insults from his bedroom at an incensed Tony and a confused Carmine.

Fade out as Tony goes to visit a heavily medicated AJ at the hospital.

Final Thoughts (yes, I’m stealing my own idea

from the “24” recaps). Two more shows, but we get nothing this week as they take the Memorial Day holiday off. The previews showed us very little. We know the war is coming, but we have no idea how it will shake out.

I’m personally wondering if, like many seasons of this show, they will place all the major action next episode, leaving the final episode to tie together the loose ends…or deal with the funerals. At the start of last season, Chase announced that the final season would be eight episodes, and we’re getting nine instead. So the possibility exists that the ninth is strictly an epilogue, and the true finale is the eight episode.

We'll find out June 3rd.

Best Line: I already mentioned it…Tony responding to Melfi suggesting that AJ intentionally made the rope too long by saying ""He could just be a f@$%ing idiot. Historically, it's been the case." Brilliant!

Best Scene: Once again there is a tremendously powerful action sequence involving Tony, although his involvement only came at the end, as I'm talking about the entire start-to-finish segment with AJ at the pool.

Latest Whacking Odds. Nothing really changed this week to make me change anything from what I wrote last week, other than taking AJ/Meadow off the list and replacing them with Janice. I think Phil is way too old school to even think about going after Tony's kids.

1) Paulie (odds – even) – I think Tony may decide to make it a two-fer in regards to people he thinks may rat him out to the Feds.

2) Butch: (odds – even) – Phil's best buddy. After seeing him laughing while Phil was

offering condolences to Tony, I figured he isn't long for this world.

3) Phil (odds – 2:1) – Then again, it could be Phil that kills Tony.

4) Carlo (odds – 4:1) – Phil's going to hit someone in Tony's crew. I'm still thinking it'll be Carlo first…although Benny or Patsy are other lower level possibilities.

5) Uncle JuniorMummyHead (odds – 5:1) – Just like Paulie's Aunt Ma, this will the last of the older generation checking out quietly.

6) Bobby: (odds – 6:1) – Still could be Phil's target.

7) Silvio (odds – 10:1) – Still feel the need to keep the entire main crew on the list.

8) Janice (odds – 12:1) – Not sure it would be an intentional hit, but Janice could get caught in the cross fire if they go after Bobby. Or, she could just do something incredibly stupid.

9) Tony (odds – 15:1) – As stated in previous weeks, the way this could all shake out, Tony may be worse off living than dying at the end. His little talk to Melfi

about there being “more than this” could be some ominous foreshadowing.