

# Tales of True Debate Adventure

## Indiana Cruz and the Temple of Sodikow, or, The Master of all Keys

*A long time ago, at a tournament far, far away...*

Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., or as he was better known to his minions, Cruzie the Debate Coach, opened his one good eye (the other eye had been lost in a freak accident involving a runaway policy tub on the Long Island Expressway, a tale for another time) at the sound of his telephone ringing. Which stretches a point, in fact, because in reality his iPhone didn’t exactly ring, but instead played the full musical soundtrack of *The Phantom Menace* whenever anyone called him. Normally Cruzie would wait the entire 133 minutes running time of the soundtrack before answering, out of respect for George Lucas, whom he worshipped as a god, but it was 6:30 in the morning, and he had a busy day ahead of him, so he answered somewhere in the middle of the pod race.

“Hello?”

“Cruzie, this is your mother,” the voice on the other end announced imperiously.

“Mom?”

“Yes, that mother. You have some other mother?”

“It’s six thirty in the morning,” Cruzie said with a groan.

“But today is a day like few others,” his mother said.

Cruzie thought for a moment. Breaking through the crust of sleepiness that still enveloped him was the realization that he had agreed to host three separate tournaments today at his home base of the Brooklyn High School of Science (editor’s note: we are using a pseudonym for the school, to protect the identities of any real people), an undertaking of what could only be considered foolhardy daring. “You’re right!” he exclaimed. “How did you know?”

“Because I read it in the TV Guide, of course,” she replied.

“My three tournaments are listed in the TV Guide? That’s amazing!”

“No, your tournaments are not listed in the TV Guide, you meatball. What’s listed in the TV Guide is that they’re playing *Flowers in the Attic* on Lifetime this afternoon.”

Cruzie was stunned. “*Flowers in the Attic*? With Louise Fletcher?”

“Is there any other *Flowers in the Attic*? Long live V. C. Andrews!”

Cruzie, not understanding why his mother had called him at 6:30 in the morning to relay this news, and not wanting to break it to her that V. C. Andrews had been dead for over twenty years and had thus forfeited any further opportunities to live long and, presumably, prosper, simply thanked the matriarch for passing along the information and wished her a nice day as he clicked the phone off and pulled himself out of bed.

(Editor’s note: the whole mother phone call thing is absolutely true. So is everything else in this story. You think we make this stuff up?)

Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., stared at the ceiling. Three separate tournaments in one day. What had he been thinking? Every room at Brooklyn Science would be used three times over, and meanwhile, he’d be missing *Flowers in the Attic*. Could a day be any less promising?

Girding his loins and gritting his teeth, in no particular order, Cruzie rose to face the day. He thought long and hard about what to wear, finally deciding on a sweater vest. The fact that every morning he thought long and hard about what to wear, and always decided on a sweater vest, did not occur to him, so we won’t bother to mention it either.

When he arrived at the high school, it was still six thirty in the morning. Cruzie needed to be here earlier today than anyone else, and ignoring the space-time continuum was his only option. His early arrival would not be a problem, however, because Lurk, the Head Custodian, had blessed Cruzie yesterday with the school’s most valuable possession. “Take this key,” Lurk had said, reaching into a small golden box encrusted with jewels. “It is the Master of All Keys to Brooklyn Science. It will open all doors, revealing countless treasures. But guard it with your life! If this key were to fall into the wrong hands...” Lurk, a small woman in flannel overalls, had shuddered. “I’d hate to imagine what would happen,” she had concluded, folding Cruzie’s outstretched hand over the key that was beyond all value.

Now Cruzie reached into his right pants pocket to extract the Master of All Keys to unlock the front door. It wasn’t there. Of course. It was in his left pants pocket. But no, it wasn’t there either. Nor was it in any of the pockets of his shirt or his sweater vest. A cold sweat broke out on Cruzie’s forehead. The unimaginable had happened. He had lost the Master of All Keys to Brooklyn Science.

“What’s the matter, Mr. Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr.?”

A young student with unacceptable hair issues was standing behind Cruzie, the first young competitor to arrive that day to participate in one of the three different tournaments that would be transpiring.

“I can’t find the master key,” Cruzie replied mournfully. “I think I lost it.”

“Use your Emory key,” the young student joked.

“Ha ha,” Cruzie replied. “Very funny.”

“I thought so.”

Cruzie shook his head. This was impossible. He couldn’t have lost the Master of All Keys. The principal would eat him for breakfast and lunch both next Monday if he didn’t return the key, not to mention whatever punishment would be meted out by Lurk, the Head Custodian, whose sadistic tendencies were well-known throughout the school district. This couldn’t be happening.

But it was.

“Just knock on the door,” the young student suggested. “There’s probably somebody in there leftover from yesterday.”

It was worth a try. Often students were left behind at Brooklyn Science, unable to finish their school work in a timely fashion, forced to spend the wee hours hunched over their test tubes and nuclear reactors in their never-ending efforts to achieve passing grades and get into Harvard or Yale or Hicksville Community College. Cruzie’s knock was answered in only a minute by a sophomore girl in a lab coat, accompanied by her pet spaniel, Muckamuck, who growled warily in the direction of the young student with the unacceptable hair issues. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t bite,” the girl said offhandedly. “Or at

least not much.” She and Muckamuck were about to head back to the lab where they were splicing tomato DNA into the genes of French exchange students, when Cruzie asked, “You haven’t found a Master of All Keys anywhere, have you?”

The girl looked at him. “Use your Emory key,” she joked. She and her dog turned and walked back whence they had come.

As the young student with the unacceptable hair issues evanesced into whatever space forensics competitors evanesce into when no one is looking, Cruzie went off to get the day’s tournaments started. First there was the National Polician Hoop-De-Doo, at which a qualifier would be selected for the competition in the swamplands of Alabama. Second there was the State Declaimer Semifinals, at which qualifiers would be selected for the Grand New York Dec-A-Rama in our state’s great capitol of Albany, which is somewhere between Canada and Monticello. And finally there was the last Mid-Hudson League event of the year, for debaters of the first- and second-year persuasion. Additionally there was building construction, state-mandated testing of some child’s left be-hind, Brooklyn Science entrance exams, an Iron Chef competition conducted entirely in Japanese, the annual meeting of the Victor and Tammy Jih fan club, and a Star Trek convention at which Wil Wheaton would be reading selections from his latest memoir *I Am Not Spock*. The question was, where to find rooms for all of this, especially without the Master of All Keys.

It was not an easy business. After locating Lurk, the Head Custodian, and asking her to unlock everything within a five mile radius—he had his own Master of All Keys, of course, he laughed, “Ha ha!” but he was too busy at the moment to do it himself—Cruzie realized that he would have to invent rooms for the MHL. Not for these intrepid debaters were rooms with names like 201 or 305. No, they would debate in Hallway Outside of Vestibule in the Boy’s Lavatory on the Third Floor East Wing #1, and other locales of a similar ad hoc nature. Soon Cruzie found some of his Brooklyn regiment and had them posting signs hither and yon illuminating which spots were which, including both Gym A and Gym B, which were divvied up as best as could be, given that they were, well, gymnasiums. But, throw a few chairs into them and you’ve got debate spaces. Dozens of them. It wouldn’t be the first tournament that was a little short of the elbow room.

By now people were arriving for all the various events. Wild roaming packs of Declaimers were rampaging throughout the hallways as only Declaimers can, scaring some of the veteran coaches who usually can handle anything life throws at them. After consulting the Oracle, the National Policians had gotten their first round started. And the MHL people were arriving, including the Tab Whisperer, who was undaunted by anything Cruzie said to shake his belief that they could achieve four full rounds.

“It’s never going to happen,” Cruzie said.

“If it happens, it happens,” the TW said with his usual lack of mania.

“But all the rooms are taken by the other events!”

“People will be fine in the gyms.”

“But I lost the Master of All Keys,” Cruzie cried.

“Use your Emory key,” the TW joked.

Having heard enough of that line, Cruzie finally cracked. “Curse you, Tab Whisperer!” he yelled.

“Well, yeah, curse you too, Cruzie. Anyhow, why don’t we make this a free tournament? What do you say? We have enough money. Let’s go out on a lark. We can afford next year’s trophies, right?”

“Afford them? Hell, I’ve already got a couple of thousand of them. We’re good until 2053, the way I reckon it.”

“Good work, cowboy,” the Tab Whisperer said as he officially opened the MHL registration.

But things did not go well. As round one was about to begin, one of the gyms was preemptively seized by the Brooklyn volleyball team.

“We’ve got a volleyball team?” Cruzie asked.

The student who was reporting the situation nodded. “Crack athletes one and all,” he replied.

“STOP THE TOURNAMENT!” Cruzie announced, doing his best imitation of the Monticello tournament. And for half an hour the novices were redistributed to rooms that made Hallway Outside of Vestibule in the Boy’s Lavatory on the Third Floor East Wing #1 look like the Ritz.

“Still think you’ll get in four rounds?” Cruzie asked snidely.

“Just watch,” Snidely replied.

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Let us take a break here from our straightforward narrative, as the day did not progress well for Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr. (And please note again that all of the following is true; only the facts have been altered slightly in aid of protecting the innocent and, occasionally, improving an anecdote. And by the way, do not accuse us of ignoring the fourth wall, if there is such a thing in a podcast or a pdf. We use the best tools at hand when it comes to storytelling. Our original plan was to come to your house with a troupe of 43 unemployed “American Idol” losers and perform the whole thing as a rock opera. This has to be better than that.)

First, there was the lost round. As it was reported in the MHL tabroom, three policy judges were sent to their room to adjudicate a deciding round in that division of the NFL qualifier; sent there specifically by one of the directors of that event, as a matter of fact. Sensing that there were various tensions in the building over which they had no control and in which they had even less interest, and used to waiting around for teams to be coached forever, as is the tradition in the policy universe, the three remained silent as, with an unflinching regularity, minute after minute passed with absolutely nothing happening. (Not unlike Declamation, even when it *is* happening.) Finally, after forty-five minutes with neither solvency nor topicality nor even the odd counterplan, they ventured forth back to the directorate—if one can venture forth back to something—only to learn that they had been sent to the wrong room. Blame for this outrage was immediately placed on Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., who had nothing to do with it. This is understandable, however, as it is natural to blame Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., for things he has had nothing to do with. It is my common practice, and I highly recommend that you try it too.

The MHL tab room, by the way, was in the Temple of Sodikow. Given that, aside from volleyball teams with a bad sense of timing, there are virtually no sports at good old

~~From~~ Brooklyn Science, forensics is about as close as they get to tossing the old ball around or making an end run for a touchdown or hitting a grand slammer or anything else of an athletic nature. At Brooklyn, forensics *is* athletics. So every trophy case in the building is filled with speech and debate trophies. There are “Welcome Back Matt” pennants in all the hallways, and the Andrew/Regan team are carried on the backs of freshmen from class to class, their feet never touching the ground. And the Temple of Sodikow is Ground Zero in all of this, with enough trophies to keep even Cruzie happy. There are trophies from every tournament beginning with the Adam Versus Eve Fruit Invitational and covering every event since. And, of course, there are photos and statues of Richard B. Sodikow everywhere. Some of them are in the guise of the Buddha. (Then again, they might be statues of the Buddha in the guise of Richard B. Sodikow. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference.) I did notice that every time Cruzie came into the room he genuflected at one of the Soddie pictures, and that all we lacked to complete the set in a religious sense was a little container of holy water by the door.

In aid of the gala atmosphere engendered by throwing a free tournament, Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., decided to throw in free food as well, putting in an order at the local Chinese restaurant for a few troughs of chicken, beef, noodles, rice and a pu-pu platter the size of Nebraska. This, as it turns out, was not a good idea. First of all, at the arrival of the first troughs, at least three freshmen were seen to dive in immediately, literally disappearing into a sea of vegetable lo mein never to be heard from again. Offering adolescents free food is an iffy proposition to begin with; offering them free food that they can’t eat with their hands unfortunately will not stop them from eating it with their hands (especially when, as it turned out, the plates and forks did not arrive with the first food troughs) and disaster will ensue. Human nature proves, as always, to be human nature. Fortunately Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., sent up a batch of food separately to the poor starving tab room, and we were very civilized in our repast, and although I did knock a couple of egg rolls out of Kaz’s hand and ran a body block on the moo goo gai pan, mostly we ate in our accustomed peace and quiet.

Did we get in our four rounds? Is the Pope German? We put in a break between rounds two and three so that people could ~~swim in the noodles~~ eat a leisurely lunch, pairing round 3 off of rounds 1 and 2, and then we lagged round 4 (which some students obviously didn’t understand, claiming that we weren’t power-pairing round 4, but, hey, they’re young), leading to an ending at around 6:30, as hoped for. When you’re good, ahem, you’re good. What can I say?

Which brings us back to our main story. Put that fourth wall back up, sports fans. We’re going back in, returning to our great tale of true debate adventure.

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The rumbling began with a simple drip, but within very few moments the drip had become a deluge. In a word, the men’s room on the first floor had exploded into a veritable flood, threatening to bring down the entire tournament, and the building along with it.

“I can’t believe that on top of everything else there’s a bathroom flood!” Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., exclaimed, having just come from an exorcism with the NFL

contingent. He was talking to Lurk, the Head Custodian. “How are we going to stop it?” he asked.

“You could use your Emory key,” Lurk joked.

Cruzie looked at her. “Rude!” he replied.

The waves from the men’s room brought on predictable reactions. Those who wished Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., ill rubbed their hands together and thanked the Lord for paying attention to the proceedings of the day. Those who wished Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., well also rubbed their hands together and thanked the Lord for paying attention to the proceedings of the day: there’s nothing like a catastrophe at someone else’s tournament to make the rest of the assembly breathe a sigh of relief that it wasn’t happening to them. Tidal waves emitting from the men’s room are about as bad as it gets. It is best that as bad as it gets happens to somebody else.

The good news, Cruzie soon learned, was that the disaster was not the result of any student activity. After fifty years of dedicated flushing, the plumbing had simply given up the ghost. Custodians were called in from every school district between the Brooklyn and the Iroquois League to help with the cleanup. Even Cruzie himself grabbed a mop at one point, in an effort to bind himself to the little people (and, perhaps, cocoon himself from the upcoming reprisals that were sure to come when it was learned that he had lost the Master of All Keys). As he swabbed the high school decks, he kept an eye open for that missing treasure, vainly hoping that it might surf along toward him as if by magic.

Because when the day was done, with all that had happened, and with all that had been accomplished, that and that alone was the one thing that remained. As the sun set over Manhattan (actually, it was a couple of hours later, but this makes for a more dramatic setting), Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., stood in front of the Brooklyn High School of Science, now empty of students and teachers and custodians and NFL committees and Eric diMichele (whom I just thought I would mention, for no particular reason) and the Tab Whisperer and the wild-eyed Declaimers and the guy from the Chinese restaurant asking for his money and the errant volleyball team that had taken over the gym. Cruzie stood alone, staring at the locked door that he would not be able to open come Monday morning, because he had lost the Master of All Keys.

The door stared back at him, mocking him, as only a locked door can do.

Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., lowered his gaze.

And then, he had a thought. It wasn’t an original thought. In fact, it had been the same thought that everyone had had that day whenever he mentioned to them that he had lost the Master of All Keys. Every halfwit in the place had made the exact same half-witted joke. But what if it were true? What if the Emory key really was magic? What if the Emory key really could replace the Master of All Keys? What if the Emory key was the *true* Master of All Keys?

Other debate coaches, having this thought, would have run home and gotten the Emory key and tried it out. But Cruise de la Cruz O’Cruzio, Jr., had not taken off the Emory key since receiving it almost a month ago. He slept in it, he bathed in it, he got Swedish massages in it, he ate beans in it, he watched *Howard the Duck* in it. The key was around his neck where it had been since that amazing day in January when he had joined the ranks of all the other coaches who had spent a fortune sending their kids all the

way to Georgia for a debate tournament when they could have saved a bundle and gone to a tournament right in the neighborhood.

He reached into his shirt, going down and under the sweater vest, and there it was. The metal was cool to his touch.

He pulled it up over his head. It glinted in the fading sunlight (which is why we couldn't set this scene in the dark, because then it wouldn't have had anything to glint in).

The Emory key.

The true Master of All Keys?

There was only one way to find out. Gingerly, observing the sacredness of the moment, Cruise de la Cruz O'Cruzio, Jr., took the Emory key and tried to unlock the front door of the Brooklyn High School of Science. (Cue the music from 2001: A Space Odyssey—*Thus Spake Zarathustra!*)

Dum. Dum. Dum.

**Da-dum!!!!**

Boom (that's the kettle drums).

Dum. Dum. Dum.

**Da-dum!!!!**

(Think kettle drums again.)

Dum. Dum. Dum.

**Da-dum!!!!**

(Full orchestra now.)

The true Master of All Keys?

Not.

Massive fail.

Bubkes.

The bloody thing didn't even fit into the lock, much less open the door.

"Curse you, Emory!" Cruise de la Cruz O'Cruzio, Jr., screamed into the night.

The thing is, not every story has a happy ending. Not every lock is unlocked by the possession of tournament tshotchkies. And not every debate tournament ends with a miracle. Staring at the useless key in his hand, Cruise de la Cruz O'Cruzio, Jr., was about to toss it into the bushes and have done with it.

"Don't do it, Mr. Cruise de la Cruz O'Cruzio, Jr.!"

He turned. Standing next to him was the young student with unacceptable hair issues.

"Don't do it," the lad repeated. "If you throw away that key, you're going to regret it. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon, and for the rest of your life."

Cruzio looked down at the key in his hand, and then up at his young interlocutor. "Unacceptable-hair-issues boy," he said, putting the key back around his neck, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

And the two walked off into the sunset, thus ending another day of great debate adventure.