

Episode 12

Any Prince in a Storm

Tina Gusset is far from impressed by the bar at the Trump Codswallop. It is big and dark and decorated mostly in drab maroons and greens that could only be appreciated after one has spent a couple of hours here sampling the merchandise. Walking in after dinner, looking for companionship while the Luce Triplets are upstairs doing their Crapaud thing, it takes all of her inner strength—and the knowledge that the alternative is working with the Luces on the inherent evil of French people—to steady her on her quest.

There isn't much going on, even though it is eight o'clock on a Friday night. Then again, this is Codswallop, Kentucky. Bright lights, big city. She expected to see more debate faces, but aside from a couple of vaguely familiar old men sitting off in a corner looking as if they've been here since last year's COC, there is no one she recognizes.

She heads to the bar. There's a guy there about her age, and she takes the stool next to him. He is not exactly Prince Charming; Prince Passable is a better way of putting it. In Codswallop. On a Friday night.

She signals the waiter. "Manhattan rocks," she orders.

The waiter nods and gets to mixing.

Prince Passable on the next stool is drinking a beer. His glass is about a quarter full. He makes eye contact with her and quickly turns away.

"Hi," she says.

He turns back to her. "Hi." His eyes drop after the tiniest second.

No further conversation is forthcoming. She notices his wedding ring. It doesn't matter much one way or the other, but it is good to know that it's there.

Her Manhattan arrives. She tells the bartender to start a tab and then, on a whim, says to him, "Fill this guy up again too, while you're at it," indicating Prince Passable's beer glass.

"Oh," Prince P says.

A real conversationalist.

"You here for the COC?" Tina asks.

He looks relieved. "Yes, as a matter of fact. You?"

No, she thinks, I just say that to all the boys. "Yep," she says. She holds out a hand. "Tina Gusset, from Franciscan Jesuit."

He responds in kind. "Hamlet Buglaroni, Nighten Day."

From Prince Passable to Prince Hamlet. His handshake is predictably weak and damp.

"It's pretty quiet here, considering that the place is filled with forensicians."

"I think everybody else is prepping. My kid is."

"An LDer?"

"Yeah. Haley Millstein."

"Ah, right. I've judged her once or twice. I'm here with the Luce Triplets."

Prince Hamlet's eyes widen. "Ooooh."

She shrugs. "They're upstairs working on their latest version of how the French destroyed civilization. Do you know their cases?"

He shakes his head. "I don't really judge much on the circuit. Jazz Voleski covers the heavy lifting for us."

"Ah, right. Jazz. Nice kid."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Nice kid."

There is a serious break in the conversation. Lisa is hoping that Prince Hamlet will carry the ball for a while, but it becomes clear that sparkling repartee is not exactly his forte. She works on her cocktail for a while, and he starts on the fresh beer that she ordered for him, and they sit in uncompanionable silence until she finally gives in. After all, Prince Hamlet is all she's got to work with.

"So tell me about yourself," she says, leaning toward him slightly.

"Me?"

"You. Where is Nighten Day?"

"Upstate New York. I mean, not really *upstate* upstate. Just upstate-from-New-York upstate."

"Been there long?"

"I was born there. Nighten Township. Went to school there, worked at Andrew Johnson for a couple of years after college, then went back home when the old coach retired. You might have heard of him. Tarnish Jutmoll."

"Tarnish Jutmoll? I loved him. He was sweet. He used to judge me all the time, back in the day. I was an Petunia LDer. How is he doing?"

"Good, I guess. He got married after he retired."

"Good for him." She raises her glass. "To Mr. Jutmoll."

Prince Hamlet raises his beer. "Jutmoll," he echoes.

Lisa signals the waiter for a refill. "This your first time at the COC? I don't remember seeing you in the past."

“First time,” he confirms.

“What do you think so far?”

He takes a moment, looking around the room. “I guess I expected it to be more lively.”

“There’s going to be a hospitality suite later. That will be lively. They would have had it started by now, but with registration delayed by the restraining order, they’re sort of playing catch-up ball.”

“They did get that worked out?”

“That’s what people are saying. Dearth was back at the table still taking in registrations the last time I looked.”

“Dearth?”

“Dearth Hannan. The tournament director.”

“Oh, right.”

“As soon as everybody’s here, the festivities will begin, at least for the people over twenty-one. At the moment everybody’s probably still out to dinner or, like you said, prepping their teams.”

“Do they do a lot of prepping?” he asks.

“A lot?” She replies. “This is the COC, Hamlet. That’s about all they do.”

He looks deflated. “Oh.”

“I gather you’re not much of a prepper?”

“Well, that’s Jazz’s job. Like judging.”

She nods. “I’ll be judging all weekend, but I don’t prep much with the Luces. They’re their own machine, fully self-contained.” She looks at his beer glass. He’s been working at it steadily, more steadily, she thinks, than before she arrived. She feels a little sorry for him. He’s nervous.

When the bartender brings her refill, she indicates that he should hit Prince Hamlet again as well.

“No, no,” Prince Hamlet tries to protest.

“This is the COC, Hamlet. You need it. One more and we’ll go off and see if we can find the hospitality suite.”

He nods. “Okay. But I don’t think I’m going to need any hospitality if I have another beer.”

She laughs. “The evening is still young, Hamlet.” She leans in even closer. “You and I may be the only people here who don’t have to babysit children.”

He instantly pulls away. “I’ve got children,” he protests. “Ben. And Jerry. And Edy, pretty soon now.”

She looks around. "Are they here?"

He shakes his head. "Not really. I mean, they're home. In Nighten. Want to see their pictures? Well, I mean, Ben and Jerry's pictures. We don't have any of Edy yet, other than the sonogram."

She puts a hand on his knee. "Now Hamlet, do I look like I want to see the pictures of your presumably lovely little family?"

He gulps. "No," he says softly. "You don't."

"I don't indeed," she agrees, giving his knee a squeeze.

If It's the Smartest Kids in the Country, It's BLSHIT

Winnable Rugrot is still in his office at the Brotherly Love School for Highly Intelligent Teenagers. It has been a long day. He would have been surprised if the injunction had stood and the tournament had been cancelled. That would have been too easy. It is enough to have set the tribe of Right To Debate people in motion, and to have installed Willy Hubjut in situ as the living symbol of the COC's exclusivity. Of course, it's not only COC that bars independent entries and, more importantly as far as Rugrot is concerned, that bars camp and non-school programs. But if he can bring down the most visible barrier, the standard-setting tournament, the rest will naturally follow. No one with a qualifying tournament wants to go afoul of the COC. If they do, they can lose their qualification, and it could mark the end of the viability of their tournament. The COC has power over the national circuit. In turn, if Rugrot can get power over the COC... The conclusion is obvious.

Rugrot is sitting back on his desk chair, his feet up on the desk, his Mac on his lap. On the screen is *The Conqueror*, Stats Magillicuddy's debate tip sheet. Not much has changed during the day. All the entrants have showed up, except for Alice B. Alice, who was already scratched earlier in the week. If wanted to, Rugrot could go online and make an octafecta bet. But that would be a waste of energy. The tournament is never going to get that far. Why bother to pretend otherwise?

Rugrot straightens up and puts the computer on his desk, closing it shut. He might as well go home. Nothing is going to happen tonight. Shot number one has been fired across the tournament's bow, and it is too early for shot number two.

Shot two will give him something to look forward to tomorrow.

Five Will Get You Ten—Trust Us on This

With the confirmation that registration has closed and everyone is in place, the action has begun at the Debate Parlor at the Rickroll Casino on the Vegas strip. The parlor has rows of comfy chairs facing computers for gamers to access ongoing tournaments, using the casino's own special modification of the firmguns.com software. Players can switch from venue to venue and place their bets without having to invest an awful lot of brain power into the process. No casino wants to make the process of taking money out of its guests's pockets and into its own coffers difficult. While some betting activities are mesmerizing, like sitting in front of a slot machine mindlessly watching animations realign themselves with each click of the player's finger, others are more engaging of active brain cells. Debate betting, like any sports betting, calls on the player's analysis of the participants, however misguided or idiotic. You like the Giants because of their record and because of the word from this week's pundits on the team's health condition and mental preparation, or you like the Giants because of the color of their jerseys. Same difference.

Players in the Rickroll Debate Parlor, who can make a bet without thinking past clicking a button, invest their mental energy in studying team's records over the year, statements posted on Facebook from the team's themselves or their coaches, and tip sheets like Stats Magillicuddy's. In fact, it is mostly Stats's sheet that commands attention, since he has the best success record historically with his predictions.

The room is almost filled at six o'clock, local time. The only bet available at this time is the octafecta, for each division at the tournament. The octafecta requires that you pick all 16 of the debaters who will advance to the octafinals on Monday. You can bet on the 16 as a whole, which pays fairly well, but not spectacularly. Or you can go for the real money, which is in betting on them in seed order. Not only must you pick the 16, but you must pick them in bracket order from 1 to 16. The odds against doing this successfully are astronomical, as is the payoff. All these bets go into one pool, and the winners, if any, split the money (after the casino's take off the top). If there are no winners, the casino takes it all. Bettors love this sort of bet because of the big payoffs. Casinos love this sort of bet because they don't always have to pay out the big payoffs, plus it isn't their money in the first place.

The parlor has almost every seat taken. These are the hardcore players, taking their time, doing their research. They look like every other hardcore group in Vegas, an assortment of semi-derelicts in clothes of entirely manmade fabrics, their fingers and teeth nicotine-stained although most of them have recently moved to vaping, running shoes on their feet that have never run, and more tattoos than their advanced average age might suggest. Later tonight, they will all be gone, replaced by the tourists in their shorts and Hawaiian shirts and wedding gowns and bridesmaid dresses. And the money will keep pouring in. And everyone will cross their fingers that in a few days they are the big winner.

But the odds are against them. There are only two guaranteed winners: the casino, and Stats Magillicuddy, the former because it skims off the top and the latter because he charges for his tipsheet.

There is no smart money being laid down on the octafectas. There is just smart people taking the money from the people who think that the octafectas are going to pay off big time. They might, but, well, I wouldn't bet on it.

Will Tina Gusset seduce Hamlet P. Buglaroni?

Will Haagen Dazs-Buglaroni find out about it, not to mention Ben, Jerry, and little unborn Edy?

Will Winnable Rugrot fire his second shot successfully?

What exactly is Rugrot's second shot?

Will anyone win the LD octafecta?

Turn it inside out and upside down but you won't find the answer in our next episode: "Wet Towels in the Hotel Room, or, Steam 'Em if You Got 'Em."