

Episode 3

The Freeing of Willy Hubjut

Dearth Hannan turns the key in the lock of her office and opens the door. The room is lined with shelves packed with books, and there are further piles of books and manuscripts and magazines covering most of the floor. There is barely enough room for her desk and chair plus one single visitor chair. The only marginally open space is the desktop, where there is room for the computer she pulls out of her backpack, plus maybe another couple of square feet for any paper she might need to work on, and to the side, a single framed family photo. There is no light aside from the orangey glow of the buzzing fluorescent lamp hanging from the ceiling. She drops into her chair, places her backpack on the floor next to her, and fires up her MacBook.

She could have checked her mail on her phone, but in the final lead-up to the tournament there has been so much going on that she's wanted to avoid, she's confined her business strictly to her business hours. Even her Facebook page, and in turn, Facebook Messenger, has been abducted by the COC aliens. Thank God only her friends and family have her phone number, so she can still connect to the real world via good old-fashioned basic texts. Otherwise she would not give good odds on being able to preserve her sanity over the next few days.

As soon as the computer is running, she flips on some music. Just some basic poppy stuff from Spotify. She doesn't care what it is, as long as it provides a steady background beat. If she actually had to do any thinking, she wouldn't turn it on, because lately she has found that if she is reading or writing, music is too distracting. But if she is doing something mindless like answering COC emails, she can sit in the cannon during the finale of the 1812 Overture and still have plenty of attention left over to do the job.

There are literally pages of new mail in her inbox. There has been an ebb and flow guiding the nature of the mail over the months, starting around the beginning of January. Issues would arise one after the other, maybe float in the air and catch fire in the forensosphere for a while, then either get resolved or disappear from the weight of their own inertia. Some issues, of course, are simply bureaucratic, questions about procedure and the like. Others are more...special. In these last few days, one or two were hysterical but most of the troublesome ones have worked themselves out, one way or another. For instance, if you're not going to be admitted into the tournament after a four month campaign practically going all the way up to the White House, well, you eventually give up. Still, Dearth notes a handful of "Free Willy" subject lines in the unread pile.

Free Willy... Dearth shakes her head. That was a dead horse right out of the gate. But that didn't stop the Willy Hubjut promotion machine. Dearth quickly scans the Free Willy emails to make sure there's nothing new about them, and then moves them into her folder of "read" tournament mail. As much as she'd like to simply delete them, she has been advised to save everything, just in case, no matter how ridiculous it might seem to her. If there is a lawsuit out there, it will have her name on it—and the name of the college, and God knows who else—so you can never be too cautious. And Willy Hubjut, or at least his family, did indeed threaten lawsuits early on.

There are people who will do anything to get into the Combat of Conquerors.

Willy Hubjut was suspended from the debate team at Oshkosh Agricultural Extension HS for "behavior unbecoming an OK-Aggian." He had, throughout his junior year, campaigned tirelessly to get to compete on the national circuit. In Willy's eyes, there was only one debate prize worth the effort: qualification for the Combat of Conquerors. He had it fully planned out. He would get a feel for the tournament as a junior, and be happy with a 3-4 record. His goal was to get the newness of being at the COC out of his system, so that when he returned the following year as a senior, well, the sky would be the limit. Unfortunately, his coach, and his school, saw it otherwise.

Rube Cootem, a social studies teacher approaching middle age with nearly twenty years of OK-Aggie experience under his belt, had never ventured with his part time debate team beyond the local region, and saw no reason to change. There were plenty of good teams within a half hour's drive, and afterschool scrimmages were easy enough to arrange, and his students learned a lot from the activity. At the end of the season, a few of them would try to qualify for the Non-Catholic Forensic League finals, and if they made it there, well, they'd make it anywhere. The idea of the COC, and attending qualifying tournaments virtually every single week, and flying from city to city seeking them out at great expense of time and money, and missing more school than one actually attended? It was hard for Cootem to imagine. If you pressed him on it, he might admit that he didn't really believe the whole thing even existed.

Willy Hubjut, however, had set his sights higher than crossing town in a minivan to have two rounds of afterschool debate with the girls at St. Joseph's Bleeding Heart Academy, or the gangbangers at the Oshkosh Reformatory for the Young and the Restless, or any other local school with thrown-together competition that, if you were lucky, were arguing the same resolution as you were, with two whole index cards of evidence to back up the cases they had written on the back of their brown paper bags in the cafeteria that afternoon during lunch break. Willy wanted the big time. Knowing that he wasn't going to get there if he waited for Coach Cootem to do anything about it, Willy took matters into his own hands.

He talked to his mother.

Dearth Hannan's phone buzzes with a text alert. She looks at the screen. Her assistant, Ditzier Bilgefont, is alerting her that the trophies have arrived, and that he'll be loading them into storage at the hotel. He's down there with a couple of SUCKy team members, getting things organized. Dearth texts back a simple letter K, then turns back to her computer.

When Dearth began working the COC, things were different. It wasn't exactly paradise, but it wasn't the opposite, either. There were politics, of course, and maybe things weren't as fair as they could be, but she had worked hard to clean things up. The old COC was run by the dinosaurs of Heppy's generation, some of whom are still around, but most of whom have gone on to greener pastures, retired from coaching or, in some cases, retired from living. They were an old boy network in the most literal sense: they were all old, and they were all male. Over time, even under Heppy, their ranks had been infiltrated by women, and thanks to Dearth, the overseers of the event now are as diverse as possible, all things considered. But that hasn't changed things as much as she had originally hoped. Diversity in the ranks turns out not to have necessarily eliminated all the butt-wipes. Just because someone is a minority in every sense of the word means nothing: for example, an impoverished black transsexual Moslem illegal immigrant from Guatemala, hooked up to an oxygen tank attached to her wheelchair, can be just as much of a dick as your standard issue one percenter white preppy.

Because of what it is—the tournament that many believe is the ultimate event in high school forensics—the COC is the focus of every eye in the activity, or at least every eye that knows it exists. Once you carve out a niche as special and unique and, theoretically, ultimate, and you build on this for decade after decade, people start believing that it is special and unique and ultimate. Debate, by all measurements, is probably a good thing. Therefore, it stands to reason that the ultimate of debate, the COC, must be the best thing. The acme. The ne plus ultra. The Platonic form of forms.

It wasn't always the case that debate was in any way special. For the longest time, it was just another extracurricular activity, and worse, an activity populated entirely by nerds who couldn't throw a ball or run a mile or get a date for the junior prom. But then things started to change, until finally, *The Article* came out—*The Article*, capitalized. Dearth had a copy of *The Article* on her computer's desktop. It had been originally published on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, and then copied and circulated and copied and circulated and then copied and circulated some more. In a word, it demonstrated that high school students who participated in debate got into better colleges than they would have if they weren't debaters. It had the facts and the figures. It showed how ex-debaters were often now on the student boards considering incoming applicants at the Ivies. It made a case that was absolutely

persuasive that, if you wanted to improve your chances in the lottery of college application, debate was a proven way to do it.

In a world driven by academic stress, where the great measure of achievement is getting into the best college, debate popularity soared. And the COC became even more elevated. If being a debater meant you could get into a better college, then wouldn't being a debater at the COC mean you could get into a better college still? The logic was indisputable, and that was the premise that sold an awful lot of parents on the whole idea of forensics as the end-all, be-all. And one of those parents was Mama Hubjut.

Dearth decides that, before she can do any real work today, she should head over to the Student Union building for a Starbucks, for something with at least three extra shots in it. She has a seminar at 11, and a team meeting at 2, and then she'll head over to the tournament hotel.

It is the day before the Combat of Conquerors tournament.

Merry COC Eve.

Is the Combat of Conquerors the ultimate event in high school forensics?

Will Dearth Hannan ever catch up reading her email?

What kind of behavior would be becoming an OK-Aggian?

Will Ditzier Bilgefont get the trophies sorted out correctly?

Will Mama Hubjut track down Dearth Hannan at the COC Eve Party and subject her to tortures unimagined in high school debate soap operas up to this time, and perhaps beyond, while champagne corks pop in the background?

It is highly unlikely we'll find out in our next episode: "What were we drinking when we came up with the name Ditzier Bilgefont, or, A Hubjut by any other name would smell as sweet."