

Episode 4

Deep in the Heart of Oshkosh, by Gosh

About one year earlier...

Coach Rube Cootem would rather be fishing. Or bowling. Or having dental surgery. Anything, other than meeting with Mama Hubjut, Willy's mother. It is four in the afternoon, and aside from the track team, which he can see running around outside his classroom window, everyone has gone home. Ms. Havisham, the track coach, is standing at the edge of the track, leaning on her walker, her long white hair blowing in the wind as she berates every student who runs, jumps or hurdles past her. Coach Cootem thinks she has seen too many movies about raw army recruits and sadistic drill instructors, and taken them all to heart.

"You've read The Article, haven't you?" Mama Hubjut is saying to him as she waves a newspaper clipping at him. He returns his attention to her.

"I have," he replies. "But it's beside the point here at OK-Aggie."

Her eyes narrow. She is a small but intense woman, with some sort of accent that Cootem can't place. Russian? Romanian? Something like that. "Why is it 'beside the point' here? Don't we care whether our students get into the best colleges?"

"Well," Cootem drawls, "that's not it at all. We want our students to succeed in life. But our team has a budget of five hundred dollars a year. If we were to send Willy to the King Ivy tournament, that would use up that entire budget and then some. We just can't afford it."

She waves The Article again. "We can't afford *not* to do it!"

He lifts his hands palms up, to indicate that there is nothing he can do about it.

"Well," she says, "what if his family pays for it?"

Cootem has been expecting this. Knowing that this meeting was going to happen, he has gone to the principal for advice. The school policy is clear: students cannot attend events unless they are official entries, and official entry has to be open to everyone. If OK-Aggie were to allow Willy Hubjut to attend the King Ivy tournament, it would have to allow the rest of the team as well. Which would mean paying for them to go, with the school accepting all liability. That was simply never going to happen.

"The school can't allow independent entries," Cootem tells her. "It's against the rules. There's nothing we can do about it."

"Even if I spend my own money on it? We don't charge the school anything. We don't hold the school liable for anything."

What Cootem wants to say is, *Right, and as soon as he falls and breaks his leg in Cambridge, you'll be suing us faster than you can say speeding bullet.* What he does say is, "I'm afraid so."

Mama Hubjut now takes her own look out the window. The track is crawling with students who are, literally, crawling. Leave it to Coach Havisham to come up with that as some sort of training. "I'll be bringing this to the principal," she says, not looking back at Cootem.

"That's your prerogative," Cootem replies, knowing that it won't do her any good. Mama Hubjut looks to be made of stern stuff, but OK-Aggie's principal is freeze-dried stern stuff on a stick. Mama Hubjut is on a futile mission.

"Good day, Mr. Cootem." She picks up her briefcase, into which she quickly returns *The Article*.

"Good day, Ms. Hubjut."

She stalks out of the classroom, leaving him alone, finally. He looks back out the window. Ms. Havisham now has the team lying on their backs, shaking their legs in the air as she stomps around them, barely missing them with the metal posts of the walker. How old is she now, he wonders. Eighty? Ninety? Rube Cootem's mother attended OK-Aggie, and Ms. Havisham was the track coach back then, and Cootem's mother swears that they held a retirement party for the old lady but she refused to leave. Most teachers barrel out the door at the first opportunity. Cootem was getting near there himself, and he was only half Havisham's age.

Maybe he will go fishing. Not today, but tomorrow. He could use a day off. As a tenured teacher, the union allows him 40 personal days off a semester. He could head to the lake he likes, and put Mama Hubjut and her slimy little Willy out of his mind, at least for the day. Like mother, like son. The pair of them were enough to send anyone off to kill as many random fish as the law allows.

Rube Cootem moves away from the window and proceeds to pack up for the night. It's been a long day. The damned debate team has for no apparent reason reared its insignificant little head and bit him on the butt. Tomorrow he'll see how the fish are biting. Maybe that will even the score.

Mama Hubjut—actually Lola Hubjut—gets progressively more irate as she makes her way home. She knows that Cootem is right: going to the principal will serve no purpose. In a case like this, the school will come together and do what it wants to do, and make up rules and regulations even if there are none that actually apply to the situation. The bottom line is simple. Willy is her son. If she wants to send him to King Ivy, or Washington, D.C., or Timbuktu, that is her prerogative. No school in the country can tell parents what they can or cannot do with their children.

By the time she reaches the house, her mind is made up.

“Wilhelm!” she calls before the door even closes behind her. “Get down here.”

A few seconds later Willy appears at the top of the stairs. “Ma?”

“I said get down here.”

Willy gets down there.

“You’re going to King Ivy,” she announces.

Willy’s face, hitherto distractedly sullen, lights up. “Coach Cootem agreed?”

Mama Hubjut shakes her head. “It does not matter whether that fool of a coach agrees or not. You are going to King Ivy.”

“But how?”

“I will register you myself. Show me how to do it on the computer.”

“But...” Willy can’t quite grasp what he is hearing. “You don’t have the team login. Only Coach Cootem has that.”

“We don’t need no stinkin’ badges,” she announces firmly, then she catches herself. “I mean, logins. We don’t need no stinkin’ logins. We’ll make our own login.”

Willy’s eyes widen. “Really?”

“If my son wants to go to King Ivy and debate and get into a better college as a result, then he is going to go to King Ivy!”

Now Willy is nodding. He has seen his mother het up before. Usually it has not been in his favor, and it has not gone well for him. But with her on his side, it will not go well for anyone else.

“The website is called firmguns.com,” he tells her. “It’s the basic site for all registrations. Come on. I’ll show you on my computer.”

And thus mother and son begin what will become a long strange trip indeed.

King Ivy is the easy one. Mama Hubjut creates an account as B’Gosh Independent, and registers young Willy for LD, with herself as judge. The registration is immediately live and confirmed, at which point she secures travel arrangements to Boston for Presidents’ Weekend. Everything from registration to hotel to flight to rental car is confirmed within half an hour.

She smiles in satisfaction. This whole tournament thing is as easy as pie.

Which, in fact, is how it turns out. Within an hour of their arrival in Boston, they are in the middle of a raging blizzard, the tournament is cancelled, and they spend the next six days snowed in, stuck in their hotel room with a tantalizing view of

Cambridge across the Charles River, watching everything on Netflix on Mama's iPad that they've been putting off for years out of lack of interest, and occasionally drifting downstairs to the hotel restaurant which ran out of fresh food on day three and is now offering either gruel, porridge, loblolly and, occasionally, for a change of pace, congee or jook.

They are not unhappy to return eventually to Oshkosh, bruised but unbroken, ready to kill for a piece of cheese or even a leaf of lettuce. And they are also ready for the next debate event. Unfortunately, the season is pretty much over, so they will have to wait until next year, meanwhile spending all that time over the summer maturing their felonious little plans.

They will return with a vengeance.

Will Rube Cootem be bringing home fish for dinner?

Will Ms. Havisham beat one of her track team members over the head with her walker?

Is The Article correct that debate will get you into a better college?

Are all debate mothers like Mama Hubjut?

Do people earn COC qualifications if a tournament only holds a couple of rounds because of the worst blizzard on record and they run out of food in the judges' lounge—not that they had much food there to begin with—and they decide to break straight to Finals and next year they only give you a twenty buck rebate?

We assume that you know that the answers won't be in our next episode: "How Much is Willy if You Have to Pay for Him, or, Too Bad Michael Jackson Isn't Around to Star in the Movie Version."