

Episode 5

AKA Willy Hubjut

They are supposed to be listening to one of the students analyzing feminist themes in the mature works of Charles Dickens, but this is roughly akin to describing fly fishing in the Sahara, and the young woman leading the discussion is mostly reading aloud from her notes, a painful droning in aid of a paper the woman is preparing that has to be the most hackneyed thing Dearth Hannan has heard since the last person who droned aloud from notes, that one on the hidden themes of sexual perversity in Jane Austen. Damned well hidden, was Dearth's conclusion at the end of the session. The problem with advanced literature studies is that every reasonable book has been done to death, and is either being done again, rendering it into academic zombiehood, or being so heartily avoided that the results—concentration on books that should have been burned before the authors shipped them off to the printer—are, for the most part, excruciating. Dearth, whose thesis is on revisionist conceptions of Jane Eyre in popular entertainment, doesn't consider herself much better. But at least she has the satisfaction of working on both a female author and a strong female character as a starting point. And she gets to watch everyone from Orson Welles to Charlton Heston as Rochester, and enough Plain Janes to make her head spin. If only someone would lock her in a room when *she* finally goes insane—

Her phone vibrates silently with a text message. Ularasa has arrived at the airport. She texts back that she'll have someone out there within half an hour, and then she texts her assistant, Ditzier Bilgefont, to get the job done.

"Are you with us, Miss Hannan?" the professor asks, looking pointedly at the phone in her hand.

She quickly stuffs it back into her pocket. "Sorry," she says. And with a silent sigh she goes back to pretending to ponder Lady Dedlock as metaphor for "the oppressor as oppressed," or maybe it's "the oppressed as oppressor." Or something like that. It's academic criticism. It's not about what the words mean per se, but how execrably one's prose can torture them into meaning both anything and nothing. It's an art.

Ularasa is just about here. The legendary tab guru. Maybe he can succeed where everyone else has thrown their hands up in disgust and walked away, never to return again.

Tab Ularasa finds the Up Up and Away Tavern with the instinctive skills of a *Columba livia domestica*, more commonly known as the homing pigeon. It is not clear whether Ularasa can smell the tapped kegged from a hundred yards away, or whether he is drawn by the magnetic pull of the earth abetted by the organic chemistry of single malt Scotch, but in either case, he is barely off the plane and on the other side of the security gates when he adjusts himself on the bar stool and orders a Bloody Mary. It is a few minutes short of noon, hence a morning drink is called for. The sun is not quite over the yardarm, at which point any beverage would do. The norms must be acknowledged. Ularasa is a traditionalist, after all. At his age, which he is happy to pinpoint simply as Medicare-eligible, traditionalism seems the way to go.

He has texted Miss Hannan and announced that he has arrived, and he has nothing to do now but to wait. All his belongings are in his carryon bag, which nowadays he has at the ready virtually every weekend. Tournaments near and far might call him at any time. He keeps a neatly packed bag near the door of his apartment with enough clothes, toiletries, electronics and Lipitor to get him through up to four days at a stretch at a moment's notice. Not having to think about it means that it's always ready to go and he never forgets an essential. He's been doing this for a couple of decades now, and he has it down to a science.

When his drink arrives, after the requisite sip and the predictable disappointment—what mixological magic does one expect at the Codswallop Pseudo-International Airport, after all—he pulls his iPhone out of his breast pocket and starts rambling through Facebook. The number one story, as it affects his so-called friends, is that of a woman in Duluth attempting to smuggle onto a flight to Chicago a vial of Evening in Paris perfume given to her by her granddaughter as a ninetieth birthday present. The vial, containing 103 milliliters of liquid, 3 ml over the permitted quantity, was about to be confiscated by a TSA official when the grandmother screamed, “Stop, thief!” and ran into the terminal in her bare feet and without a belt before anyone could stop her, disappearing within moments on the wrong side of the security line. All flights in and out of Duluth had immediately been cancelled until this dangerous terrorist villain could be apprehended. The Duluth authorities thought this reflected well on their emergency preparedness. Tab Ularasa thought it made them look like dropouts from the local Klown Kollege. But whichever opinion one held, this much was certain: Closing down an airport in the U.S.A.—*any* airport in the U.S.A.—has a domino affect on every other airport in the U.S.A., and beyond. Which Ularasa could now read in the updated postings on Facebook. Every single person he knew who was on the road to Codswallop and the COC via air, was delayed indefinitely. Some of them blamed their airline. “Delta is the absolute worst,” or “JetBlue is the absolute worst,” or “United is the absolute worst.” In all these cases, correspondents swore they would never fly said airline again, which is exactly what they swore the last time their flights got delayed by those exact same airlines. One or two people were perceptive enough to track down the source of the problem to a poor old woman who simply wanted to keep the humble gift presented to her by her only granddaughter. In those cases, they cursed Grandma with a vitriol even Adolph Hitler would have shuddered at.

Tab Ularasa, on the other hand, already in Codswallop, with a vodka beverage (however bland) in hand, simply closes his eyes and relishes the schadenfreude of the thing. Having arrived is so much better than being on one's way.

He looks at his watch. Hannan had told him about half an hour. He still has plenty of time to wait, and why not enjoy another Bloody Mary. All right. Enjoy might not be the operative word. *Order* another Bloody Mary. That was good enough. He catches the bartender's eye and points at his glass, sending a clear message down the length of the bar. Two minutes later a fresh glass is in front of him.

"To the COC," Ularasa salutes quietly, raising his glass. "And the grandmothers of the world, wherever they are."

Ularasa mindlessly continues scrolling through Facebook. The airways really do seem to be getting into a mess of delays. He is connected to almost everyone heading to Codswallop, and they are all complaining one way or the other. They will get here eventually—they always do—but they will not be happy when they arrive. Most are not precisely headed for Codswallop. The Pseudo-International Airport only has about four flights a day from anywhere further away than the next county over. No, the usual route to Codswallop is via Cincinnati or one of the more major Kentucky airports. Rental cars, or more likely vans, are picked up at various metropolitan locations and pointed in this direction. A couple of schools even take school buses, twelve- or fourteen-hour trips, or even longer, from states that Ularasa has only read about in fantasy novels, making journeys that challenge the physical limits of the human body. These are not the folks who are posting. These elemental travelers are between cell towers, and will remain so until they get about three states away.

As he scrolls, Ularasa is surprised to see a Free Willy posting. It's been a while since Willy Hubjut's smiling yearbook photo face has seen the light of social media day. Good old Willy. Ularasa smiles. He has a history with the Hubjuts. In fact, it's probably entirely due to him that Willy Hubjut isn't on his way to Codswallop to represent Oshkosh Aggie HS—unbeknownst, of course, to Oshkosh Aggie HS.

It began back at the Pup-A-Roni, one of the first big tournaments on the national circuit.

It was just a matter of following procedure.

In the past, almost every tournament Ularasa worked seemed to have a number of people sneaking in under dubious pretenses. There were all these lone wolf mavericks out there, traveling around the country in the hunt for COC qualifications, not only seemingly without the knowledge of their schools, but often with no adult supervision whatsoever. They would hop onto a plane and turn up at a circuit tournament, they'd debate, maybe they'd take a COC limb or maybe not, and a week

later they would turn up halfway across the country at the next circuit tournament and try again. The lure of the circuit, and the COC, was driving people to incredible extremes.

If free-floating mavericks were just a matter of theoretical supposition, Ularasa would argue against them, but he wouldn't care all that much about it. But in the real world, students turning up unchaperoned, often under false pretenses, posed a threat to him personally. As one of the people in charge of a tournament, when that loose cannon kid fell off the balcony and broke his coconut, the parents would be suing everybody in sight, and Tab Ularasa would be as much in sight as anyone else at the tournament. Ularasa needed a lawsuit like he needed the proverbial hole in the head.

So, as a matter of policy, he double-checked any entry that seemed even marginally suspicious. An entry at the Pup-a-Roni for a single student from Oshkosh-Aggie was suspicious enough. That the person making the entry, and the name of the entry, were identical, turned the suspicion level up a couple of notches. And when Ularasa went on line and found the name of the coach at Oshkosh, which did at least have a debate team, and then emailed that coach to learn that Oshkosh wasn't sending any students to the Pup, the game was afoot. Ularasa supplied the information to the coach about Hubjut's entry, and that, theoretically, was the end of that. The next thing Ularasa heard, Hubjut was suspended from the Oshkosh-Aggie HS debate team.

Conduct unbecoming an OK-Aggian...

A few days later, a student named Willy Hubjut, from a high school in Seattle, registered for the Pup-a-Roni tournament. "Space Needle High School WL" was not entered by someone named WL. He was registered by someone named Maria Mavrone. When the internet demonstrated categorically that there was no such school as Space Needle, Ularasa erased the entry.

The game was even more afoot. It was both feet, at a run.

Over the next two weeks, a new Pup-a-Roni entry appeared on an almost daily basis, with a different affiliation, and often a different student name. What didn't change was the name Maria Mavrone as the registrant. The woman obviously got around.

The endgame came when Mama Hubjut, using her maiden name, entered a home-schooled student named W. George Mavrone. For the first time, she added a judge to the registration, a college kid Ularasa knew from California. Once again Ularasa vetoed the entry. This time Mama Hubjut wrote the university a strident email claiming that she had already paid for the plane tickets for both W. George and the college student, and had therefore invested a great deal of money in W. George's attendance, and therefore the university was, in effect, stealing money from her by not letting in her entry. The university lawyers, needless to say, had a great laugh over the idea that, since Mama had now spent money in perpetrating her fraud, they were now somehow obligated to finally accept her little criminal in training.

Willy Hubjut, along with W. George Mavrone and about a half dozen other aliases, never did attend the Pup-a-Roni. Not only that, Tab Ularasa, who was connected to almost every tab room in the country, passed the word around to be on the lookout for this particular freebooter extraordinaire. It wasn't so much that he wanted to bar the Hubjuts from the forensics universe as he couldn't wait to see what they were going to pull next.

The Hubjuts were tireless. And, before the season ended, young Willy had only managed to gain entry to two tournaments. One, run by the Brotherly Love School for Highly Intelligent Teenagers (AKA the BLSHIT tournament), was an issue all of its own, but in any case, Willy came close to but did not win a qualification. The other tournament, in Bug Tussle, Oklahoma—the Buckluskey Bonanza Event—was so remote that it was one of the few outside of Ularasa's personal range, and that is where Willy managed to actually win a tournament for the first time in his life, thus acquiring a single COC qualification.

But, alas, it takes two quals to tango, and Willy only had one. And so the campaign began. Young Willy Hubjut, who had been tossed off his school's debate team and spent the rest of the season attempting to debate by pretending to be from somebody else's debate team, made the claim that, essentially, he was the victim of a debate cabal that wanted to keep young stars like himself from overturning the status quo. Why should high school debate only be for high schools? Didn't students have an innate Right to Debate? The Right to Debate, or RTD, became a cause celebre, and Willy Hubjut became its standard bearer. He went on Facebook, created the Free Willy page—freeing Willy Hubjut from the tyranny of Big Debate—and got a whole bunch of likes. Most of those were from students who believed everything Willy told them. A few of them were from people who had liked everything from “Take A Serial Killer to Lunch Day” to “Bring Back Nixon by Any Means Possible” since an undead President, it was claimed, would be better than the one we have. The COC advisory board remained unmoved, and Willy Hubjut's bid for an at-large slot at the tournament was not accepted.

Willy Hubjut hadn't been heard from since. Although Tab Ularasa wouldn't be surprised to see him on the picket line later in the day.

Anything is possible at the Combat of Conquerors.

Ularasa signals the waiter again. There is time for one more Bloody Mary before noon. At which point he can switch to the real liquor.

Ularasa was born to tab. Hell, they even named the activity after him. Plus he is in a bar and the day is still young. Life is good.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

Will Dearth Hannah jump off the roof of Thornfield?

Will Ularasa's drinks improve when the sun is over the yardarm?

What's a yardarm?

Is there an inherent Right to Debate?

If there is an inherent Right to Debate, has Donald Trump ever heard of it?

Will Willy ever be free?

We don't know, and doubt if anyone will care in our next episode: "Evening in Paris, or, When was the last time you had a bath, lady?"