

Episode 9

Hello, I Must be Going

Arriving at any tournament marks the gathering of the clans. Coaches, judges, students—it's the same for all of them. They haven't seen one another for maybe a week or two, or a month or two, and in some cases, not since last year at this very same place. People are checking into their rooms, high-fiving in the lobby, making dinner plans, and generally turning a normally sedate urban hotel into an ad hoc high school gymnasium. The handful of patrons who have nothing to do with forensics and who have spent good money for their rooms on the assumption that they would enjoy a quiet haven at the inn and revel in the lazy Kentucky spring weather, clasp their valuables close to their chests as they navigate the sea of adolescence that has descended on the place, hustling back to their rooms to stay there until this all blows over. Who can blame them?

"Welcome to the Bahamas," Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., mutters as he enters the lobby of the Trump Cosdwallop. The Nighten Dayers rented a car back at Codswallop Pseudo-International Airport, and are coming in from the hotel parking lot with all their luggage and backpacks draped over their shoulders. A long line snakes back from the registration desk, and Buglaroni sighs as he hustles over to it. Haley and Jazz leave him to it, and are immediately sucked out of his sight and into the welcome of their peers, their part of the gathering of the clans. Oh, well. He'll find them when he needs to. For now he stands on the line, trying to remember who some of these people are as he scans the faces around him.

Buglaroni has never been to the COC. He was never that good a debater back when he was a student at Nighten Day, although he had come to enjoy the life. He had been happy to get away for the odd weekend, out from under the domination of his extremely Italian nonna forcing pasta down his gullet at every opportunity, and his extremely uninterested father, Ham, Sr., who, when he was around, mostly just sat in front of the TV sulking. Who wouldn't want out of that?

Given the light quality of Buglaroni's personal experience, it was probably a surprise to those who knew him, first, that he graduated college, second, that he graduated with a teaching degree, and third, that he got into coaching. His first gig was at Andrew Johnson Memorial High School, Home of the Unimpeachable Education. He had drawn his first coaching blood as the tournament director of the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial and its concurrent event for novices, The Little Johnson. He had managed to pull it off a number of times. But he never coached anyone as far as the COC in his years at AJ. On the other hand, he had found and married the love of his life, and during that period he and Haagen Dazs-Buglaroni had the twins, Ben and Jerry. When a position opened up back in Nighten Day, Buglaroni jumped on it. He had always loved the Hudson Valley, and he thought it

was a great place to raise children. And now, at the end of his first season, with a daughter on the way (he and Haagen planned to name her Edy), he is at the COC.

Amazing.

He knows some of the coaches by sight, having hosted them at the Reconstruction Memorial, but it would be a stretch to say that he is friendly with any of them. He might try to find some of his local colleagues that he knows are coming this weekend, and maybe hook up for dinner or something. He is still at the acquaintance level with them at best, but progress is being made. Buglaroni fully believes that soon, maybe in sixty years or so, he will enter into the ranks of the Debate Gods. At the moment he would be happy just to see the line move a bit.

Despite the noise in the lobby, there is suddenly an even bigger noise over by the elevators. For the first time Buglaroni notices a handful of kids carrying signs reading "Free Willy" and "Support the RTD." He knows a little bit about this; it's hard not to. The Free Willy people and the Right to Debate people are interchangeable. They've been campaigning all year to allow anyone who wants to debate into tournaments, even if they don't have a school to support them. Sometimes it's just kids on their own, other times it's the camps and afterschool programs. Most tournaments won't let them in by the same logic that most schools don't let non-school entries into, say, their tennis tournaments. The universe of schools is, by default, schools, and the activities within that universe are controlled as school activities by those schools. Seems logical. But to some, this is discriminatory. The schools are disallowing education, they say. When Buglaroni was at AJ, he was barred from letting in unofficial non-school entries, but the Recon Memorial was a small enough fish that no one bothered to picket. The COC, on the other hand, is the fish to beat all fish. This is where people actually carry protest signs and, apparently, mix it up with their opponents. Buglaroni watches as a couple of men in suits lead the protesters off to the door and outside the building, where he can see through the glass front that they are now taking up their station there.

"Next!"

It is Buglaroni's turn to register. He moves up and secures his two rooms, one for Haley and one for himself and Jazz Voleski. He can't say that he's excited about sharing a room, but there's only so much money in the pot between Nighten Day's and Haley's family's contributions to the cause. Whatever. He'll survive the two nights. Although, for the moment, he can't help but wish that either Haley were a boy or Jazz were a girl, so they could share a room and leave him to his own happy devices. But he doesn't expect to see Jazz much. He'll be working with Haley on their last minute prep. And either Buglaroni will find someone to hang out with, or he'll go to sleep. It's much of a muchness either way.

A cab pulls up in front of the Trump Codswallop Hotel. A handful of Free Willy protestors are standing off to the side, not exactly eager to get tossed even further away by the hotel's goon squad. When the cab door opens and its first passenger steps out, the Free Willy folk's jaws drop.

It is Willy Lubjut himself. A minute later, Mama Hubjut follows.

“Free Willy!” the protesters begin chanting. “Free Willy!”

Willy smiles at them, while Mama Hubjut raises a hand to silence them. “Not now,” she tells them. “Put down your signs. Follow us.”

As the Hubjuts’ luggage is pulled from the rear of the cab, they are joined by the Willy brigade. Mama H quickly gives them instructions, and then, with Mama and Willy in the front, the little group enters the hotel.

It takes a few minutes before the crowd in the lobby realizes that they have been joined by debate celebrities, or more to the point, in the Hubjut case, mostly non-debate celebrities. Mama H strides up and takes her place in line at the hotel desk. The noise level in the lobby has reduced to a mere whisper. Within ten minutes the Hubjuts are checked in, and once again Mama and Willy lead their little group off, this time to the elevators.

After the FW contingent is swallowed up by the elevator they board together, the questions everyone in the lobby asks are the same. What are they doing here? Are they really going to try to enter the tournament? Are they going to challenge the COC? And the most important one of all: How can I get a piece of this action? After all, Willy Hubjut is the poster boy for the Right to Debate, and almost every debater in this room sides with him. Then again, not a coach in the room doesn’t side *against* him. If there were ever a dividing line between the adults and the adolescents, it’s the Right to Debate.

“I’ll bet you they’re going to registration,” someone says. And a minute later, everyone is saying it. “They’re going to try to register. They’re going to registration!”

The lobby begins to clear out. If the Hubjuts are going to registration, the rest of the tournament, at least the participants hanging around the Trump Codswallop lobby, are going to go with them.

Onsite registration for this year’s COC is in the Boom-Boom Room on the thirteenth floor of the Trump Codswallop. It is one of the many conference areas in the hotel, which boasts state-of-the-art facilities for any business that wishes to host any sort of meeting, proffering both the hotel’s luxury trappings and the proximity of the many local attractions in Codswallop, whatever they might be. Perhaps it is the lack of local attractions in Codswallop that is the real attraction, forcing the businesses to concentrate on their business.

Dearth Hannan is at her computer in the Boom-Boom Room, enjoying a temporary lull in sign-ins. Four of her team members are with her at the long table, each with a specific role to play, either signing in judges or double-checking names or correcting the invoices or collecting the registration fees. Dearth’s job is simply to be there, greeting people and welcoming them to the tournament and thanking them for coming and, if she actually knows them beyond casual debate acquaintance, catching up on the latest.

Dearth is mindlessly reading Facebook postings when there is the clack of heels coming toward the room. She notes it, but ignores it. Tomorrow there will be a storm of heel-clacking when the girls who are debating are all spiffed up for the competition, but today they are all in mufti, and debate coaches wearing the hard-soled sort of shoes that make any noise whatsoever is a statistical impossibility in a group that has been dressing for comfort, and in the same clothes, for the last three decades, so the odds of that heel-clacking sound coming from anyone involved in the COC is virtually nil.

But the sound keeps on coming. And then halts.

Dearth looks up from her computer. A dark-haired woman with a dark expression is standing in the doorway of the Boom-Boom Room. She is turning her head to take in the room, then she spies Dearth and starts walking again, to the resumed accompaniment of her clacking heels. Immediately behind her is a student Dearth vaguely recognizes, and behind them is a studentish-looking contingent, a couple of whom are trying hard to hide their Free Willy signs.

The light dawns. That's who the vaguely recognized student is! Willy Hubjut! And the woman must be—

"I am Lola Hubjut," she announces, marching up to where Dearth is sitting. "I am here to register my son Wilhelm for the tournament."

No, Dearth thinks. This isn't happening. There was never, for a moment, the slightest indication that little Willy was welcome at the tournament. And now the Hubjuts are here in person? No. No way.

"Is there a problem?" Mama Hubjut asks.

Dearth finds her voice. "I'm afraid Willy—Wilhelm—isn't a qualified entry," she finally manages to say.

"Why not? He has a COC limb."

"Well, it takes two limbs, or an at-large bid to qualify."

"We put Wilhelm's name in for an at-large bid. He should have received it."

It is never a good idea to argue with a debater, be it a literal debater or, even worse, a coach. You may take a debater aback for a moment, by showing up where you are least expected and wearing high heels and talking with a thick accent, but debaters are pretty fast to recover when there is an argument in the making.

"But he didn't receive it," Dearth replies.

"That is beside the point. By all rights, he should be qualified."

"But he isn't qualified," Dearth says. She intends to remain succinct. The fewer words, the simpler the logic.

"Students have an inherent right to debate," Mama Lubjut continues. "Institutions like the COC have an obligation to honor that right, otherwise they are violating the students' education."

“We have rules about who can’t and who cannot qualify for our tournament, Ms. Hubjut. According to those rules, Willy doesn’t qualify.”

“Then change your rules.”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that.”

Mama Hubjut is standing over Dearth, who has remained seated during this exchange. Mama H stares at Dearth, as if force of personality alone will get her to change her mind. “You will not let Wilhelm in?” she says finally.

“We will not let Wilhelm in,” Dearth replies.

“So be it,” Mama Hubjut says, turning around to her son and the Free Willy campaigners. “Free Willy!” she announces loudly.

The campaigners immediately pick up the chant. “Free Willy! Free Willy!” Signs that were marginally hidden are now out in the open. The campaigners begin marching in front of the registration table. “Free Willy! Free Willy!”

Dearth shakes her head and sighs. Do these people really think that a picket line is going to stop the COC?

Meanwhile Mama Hubjut has pulled her phone out of her purse. She quickly types a message and sends it off. The entire content of the message is a single word in all caps: WAR.

Rugrot reads the message on his iPhone. WAR.

War, indeed.

He makes a phone call. “They won’t let him in,” he tells the person who answers.

“You realize, of course, that this means war,” the person on the other side of the line tells him.

“That’s exactly what we wanted,” Rugrot replies.

“I’ll have the injunction in five minutes. The judge is all prepped.”

“Go for it,” Rugrot says.

“I’m going.” The person on the other side clicks off.

Mason Rumpole, the attorney for the Brotherly Love School for Highly Intelligent Students, is also acting in this matter on the behalf of Wilhelm Mavrone Hubjut. In other words, Willy is the client, but BLSHIT is footing the bill. Rumpole’s belief has

been that they would not get a fair hearing in a Kentucky court, where the Old Boy network would be in fuller bloom than the local magnolia trees. So he is in the courthouse of federal circuit judge Amber Alert in downtown Philadelphia, right across the river from Rugrot in Camden.

Rumpole has known Alert for twenty years. If there is a more activist judge in the country, he is unaware of it. Her Honor Justice Alert believes that there are more rights implied in the Constitution than there are peas on a pod farm.

The lawyer has already presented his brief to the judge, and the injunction has been written. They have only been waiting for definitive action against the plaintiff for the judge to sign it. The COC's final refusal to allow Willy Hubjut to debate was that definitive action. Rumpole is let into Justice Alert's chambers, the injunction is signed, and, as soon as it is in the hands of the proper authorities, the COC will be halted dead in its tracks. Getting the injunction into those hands should take, according to Rumpole's estimate, no more than another five minutes, this being the internet age and all.

Sometimes the wheels of justice move faster than the eye can see. Not often, but once in a while.

Mason Rumpole is quite pleased with himself.

Sheriff Jimbob Van Cliburn is surprised to see picketers at the door of the Trump Codswallop Boom-Boom Room. This is the classiest hotel in Codswallop; they haven't had a protest here since the Vietnam War, and that one was a handful of Daughters of the American Revolution handing out home-baked ginger snaps to support Our Boys Overseas and, simultaneously, Get Haircuts for Our Boys Over Here. It was peaceful and short-lived. The one that greets him now, the loosely assembled band of high school students, a few of them carrying Free Willy signs, looks peaceful enough, but he has no idea what their gripe is. He makes a note to call Deputy Fife as soon as he is done here.

The picketers eye him curiously as he makes his way through them and goes into the room. He makes a serious impression in his uniform, the badge on his shirt pocket and the gun on his hip clearly identifying him as the Law. They make no effort to interfere with him, and while they have been a little quieter for a moment since his arrival, his apparent lack of interest in them has brought their volume back up, a monotonous chant of "Free Willy, Free Willy" over and over again.

Inside the Boom-Boom Room, there is only a long table of college students, surrounded by paper and printers and computers and, over to the side, a pile of boxes stamped with the company name Codswallop Awards. From the top of some of the boxes peep out shiny horses' heads.

Sheriff Jimbob has been instructed to address himself to the woman in charge, who has been described to him simply as black and in her twenties. That would have to be the woman at the end of the table, then, closest to the door.

“Dearth Hannan?” he asks as he approaches her.

“Yes, sir,” she replies.

“My name is Sheriff Cliburn. I have a court order for you to close down shop.”

The young woman looks at him blankly. “Excuse me?” she finally manages to say.

“Court injunction to cease and desist the—” he pauses to read from the paper in his right hand—“the Combat of Conquers.”

“I can’t do that,” Dearth says. “We’re registering people now. The tournament is tomorrow.”

“Well, ma’am, I’m afraid you have no choice.”

He holds out the paper, and she takes it from him.

Sheriff Jimbob Van Cliburn tips his hat. “Have a nice day, ma’am.” He turns and leaves the room.

The Combat of Conquerors is now officially over.

Is this the end of the COC?

Will Dearth Hannan have to admit Willy Hubjut?

Are Mason Rumpole and Amber Alert a romantic item on the side?

Will Hamlet P. Buglaroni make new friends among his fellow coaches now that they have nothing better to do for the weekend?

Are all these left wing debate people going to accept the fact that they’re staying in the Trump Codswallop, when the perfectly good Sanders Codswallop is begging for business right down the street?

As always, we’ve hidden the answers somewhere other than in our next episode: “The American Wheat Board suggests a heaping portion of gluten with every meal, or, If it wasn’t for my Allergies, I’d actually have to eat this crap!”