



Series 2

Episode 1: The Next Generation

Ten years later...

Tarnish Jutmoll walked into the classroom feeling that same mix of apprehension and hope that had annually infused this moment for longer than he could remember. How many years had he been the speech and debate coach at Nighten Day School? A hundred years? Two hundred years? Somewhere in there, certainly.

The sight of a filled classroom resolved the apprehensive part of the mix. He always worried that literally nobody would show up for the orientation meeting, that this year there would be no novices, that this year all the freshmen at the high school would find some other activity to fill their extra hours, that this year the apparent coat of nerdiness that was the veneer of the activity would finally eliminate any attraction whatsoever it might have, even to the nerdiest of the year's incoming freshmen. But there they were, maybe twenty of them all told, huddling together for spiritual warmth in the middle of the room, surrounded by the returning upperclassmen.

Jutmoll breathed the annual sigh of relief. There would be a team again this year. It was ever thus.

As for the other part of the mix—the hope—that would remain to be seen. Every year the hope was born again that this time out they would have a superhero. Oh, there were plenty of winners, and enough opportunities for everybody to take tin at tournaments sooner or later. If they held on, that is. In speech and debate, every dog has his day if he barks often enough. But the idea of a superhero, someone who won all the time, every time, no

matter what, right out of the starting gate? That was something Jutmoll hadn't had in years, and that was something he always hoped for. The superheroes had a certain magic, a certain excitement, that never let up. The rewards of being a coach were spread over all of the kids—Jutmoll firmly believed that, as the educator he was—but the fun of a superhero was something else altogether. Maybe somewhere, in the twenty or so of these befuddled looking freshmen, there was a superhero just waiting to demonstrate his or her incredible abilities. One never knew, until the tournaments actually started.

Then again, there was a possibility in the returning sophomores. A star of novice dimensions who could possibly go the distance. Except that often, novice stars burned out beyond recognition in the fires of sophomore slump. Again, only time would tell.

Jutmoll picked up a marker and wrote his name on the board. Tarnish Jutmoll. Nobody quieted down as he did so. He was not, by any reckoning, a prepossessing individual. Somewhere into his seventh decade, of little height—barely five feet tall—and with strikingly white hair in an unkempt mass, a single thick eyebrow and a pointy white Vandyke beard, he looked as much goat as human. That he walked with a pronounced limp and occasionally sported a wooden cane, which he had left home today so as to make a better first impression, all a result of his long years of bowleggedness, where each leg seemed to want to walk off in its own direction despite his attempts to marshall them either one way or the other, did not improve his physical presence.

He turned around and faced the students. Few of them noticed. Then he made the tiniest bit of eye contact with his captain, Lily Maru, who responded immediately.

“Shut up, people,” she yelled, her voice sharp and powerful. Almost painful, in fact.

The people shut up.

“Thank you, Lily,” Jutmoll said, nodding at her.

She smiled back at him. She was the fourth and last of the Maru sisters, a family that had been in forensics at the school since back in the 90s. Whenever one graduated, another seemed to arrive to take her place. Lily was the best of the lot. Not a superhero, but solid. She would probably make it to the big qualifier tournaments at the end of the year. She wouldn't win any of them, but she'd get in. For most kids, and coaches, that was good enough.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Jutmoll began, scanning the new faces in the room, “welcome to the Nighten Day Speech and Debate Team.” He pointed

to his name. “That is me. Mr. Jutmoll. We’ll find out who you are when you write down your names and information on these sheets of paper.” He reached into his briefcase and pulled out some printed sheets for the students to enter all their data, including home address and parent info. “Pass these around please, and fill them out.”

There was the usual confusion as the papers started moving around the room. Jutmoll knew that half of the newbies wouldn’t have pens or pencils, and half again would write in such execrable handwriting that they might as well have skipped it altogether, but he was used to that by now. How long had it been? A hundred years? Two hundred years?

“What we want to do this afternoon is describe the activity, so you can get a sense of what we do, and where you might best fit into it. As I said, this is Speech and Debate, and they are quite different from one another. On the Speech side, simply put, we find the more literary people, and the more dramatic people. We perform, we interpret, we may even entertain. On the Debate side, we argue. We discuss current events and ethics, what we should do in certain situations. In debate we are more competitive than the Speech people, in that we are one-on-one or two-on-two, but all of Speech and Debate is competition based. And, oh yes, somewhere in the middle between Speech and Debate is what we call extemporaneous speaking, which is for the news and current event junkies among you. If you’re very much one of those things, either a performer or an arguer or a news junkie, you may already have an idea where you want to be. If not, that’s fine. You’ll have ample opportunity to decide where exactly you fit the best. Or, if you want, you can do everything. You can move around all you want. It’s all fine by me.”

At that point, Jutmoll began to defer to his upperclassmen, to let them explain their specific activities. In his experience, the broadest classification of what was what was enough for the newbies to have a sense of where they were going to fit. The rest of it was simply filling in the details. They’d listen to what they wanted to listen to, and tune out what they thought was not their thing. Most of them probably already knew what they wanted before they even showed up this afternoon. Somehow the specifics managed to disseminate mysteriously into the atmosphere of the school district without any prompting on Jutmoll’s or the team’s part, and when freshmen arrived, they knew exactly where they fit in. When, that is, they did arrive. There had been a couple of years when almost no one showed up, which was why Jutmoll was originally apprehensive. He didn’t have the world’s biggest team, but he didn’t want to have the world’s smallest team. Maybe ten kids at each grade level, which was a reasonable ten percent of the total school

body...that was enough. More than enough. And that's where he was now. Of the twenty new kids, experience demonstrated that half of them would be gone by Christmas, but the rest were in for the duration, one way or the other. It was impossible to tell which were which at this point, Speechies or Debaters. But they'd sort themselves out, soon enough.

After about half an hour of the various students explaining the ins and outs of their activities, Jutmoll took over again and did some unsubtle selling of the concept of Speech and Debate overall.

"We'll make you smarter than the average bear," he said, "because we'll cover things they just don't usually talk about in high school. Depending on which activity you choose, we'll make you better readers or researchers or writers or maybe all of those. And we'll make you good public speakers, even if the thought of speaking in public instantly gives you diarrhea."

The word diarrhea always got a laugh: it was that kind of audience. Jutmoll allowed for it, then went on.

"We will also take you throughout the northeast, weekend after weekend. No one travels every weekend, except me, but most people travel a lot. We get you out of the house and away from your families over and over again."

This was also, predictably, a big hit with the crowd.

"We go to all the major universities, and high schools from here to kingdom come. If you like to travel, you've come to the right place."

If you liked to travel to high schools, that is, and stay at EconoLodges and Days Inns. Which some kids did, indeed, think was the epitome of worldiness.

"You don't have to make up your minds completely, but the next meeting, tomorrow, will be Debate only. The meeting on Thursday will be Speech only. Pick whichever one makes sense to you now. You can always change your mind later on."

Jutmoll looked over at the clock. The late buses would be here shortly.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is that. I'll see you all later in the week."

There was the usual collection of materials as the students grabbed their things and made their way out the door. Some of them had computers, some of them had handheld devices, a couple had notepads in which they had written down every word that had been spoken at the meeting. They all had backpacks, stuffed to overflowing with the effluvia of teenage high school existence.

They were gone in two minutes. Jutmoll let out a breath and relaxed. Another year. And what no one knew except him, the last year. Tarnish Jutmoll's last year as the Speech and Debate Coach at Nighten Day. His last year teaching social studies. The end. Finished.

He had no idea what his life would be without the thing that had defined it for over thirty years.

He turned around and erased his name from the board. Retiring would be as simple as that. He would erase his name from the board of high school forensics, leaving behind nothing but a faint blue smudge.

Another year. The last year. He picked up his briefcase and walked out of the classroom on his poorly designed legs.

Will any of this year's team turn out to be superstars?

Will any of this year's team show up for the next meeting?

If Lily Maru is the fourth Maru sister, who was the third? And for that matter, whatever happened to the other two?

Is Sarah Palin seriously considering moving from Fox News to NPR to replace Carl Kassel?

Will the Harvard tournament be another small, intimate affair this coming weekend as in previous years?

The answers to these and few other questions will not appear in our next episode: THX 1139, The Sequel that Wasn't.