



Series 2

Episode 16

1. A Room of her own

Hautboy LeMonde had planted the idea in her head, luring her away from debate into speech, but it was probably inevitable that Nighten Day freshman Sashimi Goldberg would gravitate to Original Oratory, where she would write her own speech that she would then perform. Sashimi was, if there was such a thing, a born writer. By the time she had mastered typing on the family desktop computer, around when she was ten years old, her brain was already bursting with stories that she wanted to tell. A voracious reader since the moment she had learned how, she had sensed something about stories and storytelling that touched a part of her that just had to respond. She had taken in so many stories that she had to bring a few out. And thus not only the idea that she was a writer but the *fact* that she was a writer began to emerge. Any life that Sashimi considered for herself in any imagined future had her writing something. If, one way or another, she wasn't a published author in another ten years or so, it would be like a bird that couldn't fly or a fish that couldn't swim, a tragedy against nature so sad as to exemplify the very meaning of the word tragedy.

Not that Sashimi thought that she was necessarily a *good* writer. Not yet, anyhow. She was smart enough to know that while she could spin stories easily enough, they weren't great stories. She needed to work on this narrative business, to practice it. She also needed more exposure to the great writing of others, both past and present. And, sooner or later, she needed the life experiences that came with time to provide her with the material to write, to be able to create narratives that others might want to follow. Her best skill at this stage was, perhaps more than anything, her realization of

both the knowledge she still needed to acquire and the further skills she needed to master. And thus she was content to take her time to do so.

But there was no question about one aspect of her brain that seemed to clearly demonstrate this writerly tendency, and that was her ability to hold an entire book in it. Not a book she was reading, but a book she was thinking about writing. She would lie in bed at night, her eyes closed, and work out every detail of the plot, every aspect of the characterizations, sometimes even the literal words that would go on the page. She had done this many times over the last few years. At the moment book in her brain was about time travel, with a hint of a love story thrown in, and it wasn't about anyone her own age but about adults, which meant that there were some parts of it that were still sketchy to her. She had some secondhand sense of adults in love, but not being neither one nor the other, it was as imaginary to her as the time travel parts of the story. Not that she ever thought she would put even a single word of this book or the other books she had developed on paper. This was merely an exercise in creation for her. She knew her skills weren't good enough yet, and she wasn't going to commit to writing anything that was less than what she wanted. She had plenty of other things to write that put good enough to shame.

For instance, for years now her school writing had been beyond exemplary. It had been so good in fact that it couldn't serve as an example to others unless they had something of Sashimi's polished narrative skills. The thought of writing an essay or even answering an essay question, which would send some students into a state of apoplexy, gave Sashimi a warm glow inside, knowing that an A+ was soon to follow. It was nice being smart, or at least being able to demonstrate a skill like writing that smacked of smartness.

So writing an Original Oratory was, fifty percent, right up her alley. An OO was supposed to, to some extent, discuss a relevant problem. A few days of online research had uncovered OOs on everything concerning the various afflictions common to teenagers, and soon Sashimi imagined that all her competition would be bulimic antifeminists hung up on socially dictated beauty norms whose problems would be magically solved if only they could find their true selves within, unless they were lucky enough to have terminal cancer, in which case they would be able to compete at the national level. A lot of teenage angst, in other words, which simply wasn't Sashimi's cup of tea. Not that she didn't have her own share of teenage angst—far from it—but not along these predictable avenues. Eventually she decided to write a piece on labels that she was tentatively calling “Curly,” as in, someone would look at her, see a lot of curly hair, and from this single trait derive a

nickname and, somehow, a total personality for her. But instead of indicting this synecdoche, as most OOers would, Sashimi would encourage her audience to embrace it. Be Curly, or Blue Eyes, or Shorty, or Lefty. Find an image to project to the world. Prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet, in the words of the poet, and allow your real self to flourish at the same time.

You get the picture.

As we said, OO was fifty percent right up Sashimi's alley. The Original part, the writing of the essay, was the proverbial duck soup, a piece of cake, falling off a log—pick your cliché. It was the other O, the Oratory part, that was difficult. Because while Sashimi had the brain of a writer, she was not in any way, shape or form a speaker. In fact, she was shy beyond shy. She could stay in her room all day and visit any of a myriad of fictional worlds and feel right at home, but in the real world, there was no feeling of home beyond the door of that room. Although often she simply preferred to be an observer, watching others going through their motions and storing up that information in her growing writer's mental file cabinet, when she was drawn upon to participate herself, she usually failed. Words did not come out of her mouth correctly, for some reason, although they came out of her typing perfectly well. The elegance with which she turned a phrase on paper eluded her when the phrase was vocal. She was naturally tongue-tied. She could never think of what to say, and over time, her knowledge that words came badly to her made her reluctance to utter them even greater.

She hadn't asked a question in class in four years.

Somehow, though, Sashimi imagined that, if she wrote her own words, she'd be able to speak them. She'd just be reading aloud, after all. Or, more to the point, reciting by memory words she had already prepared. How hard could that be?

In other words, the choice of OO as an activity had two purposes in her mind. First, she'd get to exercise her excellent writing muscles, which she loved to do. And second, perhaps by using her own writing as a springboard, she might somehow learn to speak in public and overcome her fear of talking. She would somehow find the way to make the words in her mind prime the pump of the words in her mouth.

Would it work? She didn't know. She wasn't even sure if she could get up in front of people and read the OO aloud, period, much less perform it with some measure of interpretive skill, or even if she did conquer doing an OO whether that would give her the poise and confidence to just, well, talk when she wasn't performing.

She would find out. And that was the important thing to her. She was going to try. The worst that could happen was that she would decide that it

wasn't a good thing, and go back into her room and lie down on her bed and polish up the time travel novel in her head some more, or maybe even start a new one.

And the best that could happen?

She might actually come out of her room once in a while.

2. The Numb Funk Chronicles

They walked back to the cafeteria in a numb funk, a mood that you shouldn't say aloud unless your enunciation is impeccable. Try it a few times yourself if you don't believe me. Numb funk...

Tucker had lost her round. On a three-oh.

She had missed her first opportunity to get a bid to the Tournament of Champions.

"I guess we won't need this," Kennerji said, holding up the flow he had just made of a round between the two debaters which would have provided Tucker's opponent in the next round if she had won.

She shook her head. "That kid owned me," she said.

"That bad?"

"I wasn't going to run theory because those judges are notoriously against it, so when he went all theory in the 1AR and kicked the whole second contention, I figured I could just moot out the fairness and move to the contention. And then all three judges decided to vote on theory!" She shook her head again. "Welcome to the Bahamas."

"You made a good run for it, Tucker," Kennerji said. "You'll bid up. Don't worry."

"I hope so." She smiled at him. "And you too," she added.

He smiled back. As Kennerji would eventually find out, he had come in 33rd seed in the tournament. As 32 people had advanced to elimination rounds, he had missed by one. If he had debated even slightly better in any of his rounds and gotten even one more speaker point. Or, heaven forbid, if he had beaten Tucker...

"I wonder how everybody else did?" Tucker asked.

"I think all the Veilies advanced," Kennerji replied.

Tucker stopped walking. "All of them?"

He nodded.

"Unbelievable. That gives Veil seven bids at the very first tournament of the year. They are definitely going to break the record this year. Most bids, most kids."

“Could be,” Kennerji said.

“Let’s go watch one of them in octos,” Tucker said. “They’re going to be around a lot this year. We’d better start getting used to them.”

Kennerji agreed, and the two of them headed off to find a Veilie to observe. It wouldn’t be hard. They were debating everywhere. And, no doubt, the Seven Samurai assistant coaches were observing everywhere else, scouting whatever opposition they could find.

Kennerji and Tucker passed Eric Rand-Walsh as they headed to the cafeteria to check the pairings and find a round to observe. Rand-Walsh was sitting on a circular bench outside the school library like a very large frog on a very large lily pad, reading a paperback copy of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.

Somehow, it seemed absolutely appropriate.

Will Sashimi Goldberg conquer her fear of public speaking?

Will Tucker bid up at her next tournament?

Will Eric Rand-Walsh learn anything valuable from The Art of War?

Is this a good time to invest in offshore drilling facilities?

Is it true that Steve Jobs uses a BlackBerry for work?

The answers to these and virtually every question that includes the words “numb funk” will not be even suggested in our next episode: “Now that *Lost* and *24* are over can we expect more episodes of *Dancing with the Stars*, or, now that we have 3D televisions, can 3D radios be far behind?”