



Series 2

Episode 21

A Star is Reborn Again

You don't know about Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., without you have read Series 1 of *Nostrum*. That high school debate soap opera was made by Messrs. Jules O'Shaughnessy and the Nostrumite, and they told the truth, mainly. It's probably a good idea that you go to Series 1 and read all those episodes, so you do that now, and we'll wait here for you.

[Whistling. Lots of whistling. N1 is, after all, longer than *War and Peace*, *Moby-Dick* and Lindsay Lohan's rap sheet combined. Whistle, whistle, whistle.]

Ah, good. You're back. So we can continue.

The good news was that Andrew Johnson High School (“Home of the Unimpeachable Education”) was solidly behind its debate team. This meant that there wasn't any likelihood that any time soon they'd decide to disband it to save money. After all, there had been a debate team at Andy J since the Roosevelt Administration—Teddy Roosevelt, that is. As far as Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., knew, Renate Screeds had been the coach since the very beginning during that Roosevelt Administration. For all he knew, she had coached Teddy Roosevelt himself. Hell, she was so old, she probably also

coached Abraham Lincoln to get him ready for his sessions with Stephen Douglas. She had been an LD coach back when LD really was L and D.

This commitment to the activity on the school's part meant that Buglaroni had a good chance of moving up past substitute and into a real teaching position. As he reasoned it, they wouldn't let the coach of their historically important debate team starve to death on a sub's salary, would they?

The bad news was, they might indeed let him starve to death on a sub's salary. Which meant not only that Hamlet P. would go hungry, but so would his wife Haagen Dazs-Buglaroni, and their twin ten-month-old sons, Ben and Jerry. Ever since the twins had been born Haagen had been begging Buglaroni to leave Andy J. and find a real job, but he had had a feeling that everything would work out if he just hung on a little longer. Not that his hopes had actually rested on someone dying, but, well, that was what had happened, and he could live with it. And at Renate Screeds's age, death was probably preferable anyhow.

(A general note: If someone lives to be ninety-five, most people will tell you that they had "a pretty good run." The ninety-four-year-olds in the auditorium, on the other hand, will just shake their heads and say, "So young, so young...")

And the really bad news was that the Reconstruction Memorial and the Little Johnson were next week—next week!—and Buglaroni didn't have a clue about what to do. He hadn't been to a tournament since he was a high school student himself. And at the time, he hadn't paid all that much attention to participating in one, much less running one. He had been, admittedly, not the best debater on the team. After some starting friction, he had settled down and done, at best, okay, but his high school years had been a turbulent time of his life, and the whole debate business, while not the most important aspect of his high school career, was one of the few true constants. That, and his grandmother trying to get him to eat and his father ignoring him. Things hadn't changed much in the years since. His father, Ham Senior, thought the twins were the sun and the moon, but as for Ham Junior... Yeah, well, whatever. Grandma Buglaroni, on the other hand, bless her ancient soul, still cooked like it was nobody's business, and made sure everyone shut up and ate, because that's what matriarchs do, even when they're ninety-five, like Grandma B.

(A good run? She was still sprinting her little heart out.)

There was only one thing for it, Buglaroni decided, getting his mind back on the team and the upcoming tournaments. He needed advice. Expert advice. And he knew exactly where to get it.

The number on Tarnish Jutmoll's cell phone was Unknown. But plenty of people had his number, various coaches and debaters... He answered.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Jutmoll?"

Tarnish Jutmoll could not place the voice. "Yes?"

"Mr. Jutmoll, it's me. Hamlet Buglaroni."

Tarnish Jutmoll moved the phone away from his ear and stared at it.

"Mr. Jutmoll?" He could hear a dim, scratchy voice coming through the speaker.

He brought the phone back. "Mr. Buglaroni. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. Are you all right?"

Jutmoll thought for a second. He had been all right until Buglaroni had called him out of the blue. Some forensicians he had kept in touch with over the years. Others had quickly entered into much warranted oblivion. Few if any had as great a warrant on oblivion as Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr.

"I'm fine, Hamlet," he finally said.

"Good. Still teaching at good old Nighten Day, right?"

"Yes. Still at...good old...Nigheten Day."

"Sweet. Here's the thing. I'm at Andrew Johnson High School now."

"Really? I thought you'd graduated."

Buglaroni chuckled. "No, no. I'm subbing."

"Oh, you're a teacher now."

"Well, I'm a sub, anyhow."

"That's very nice." And, Jutmoll thought, it spoke volumes about the quality of teacher education in this country. Who was going to call him next and announce that he was substitute teaching? Osama Bin-Laden?

"And, well, I've got a problem." Buglaroni paused. "You know Ms. Screeds, right?"

"Of course. How is Renate?"

"Well, she's sort of, uh, dead."

"Sort of?"

"I mean, yeah, well, she is dead."

"Really most sincerely dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is that why you called? To let me know? I'll be happy to pass the word around."

“Well,” Buglaroni said, “that’s part of it. But the thing is, the Reconstruction Memorial and the Little Johnson are supposed to be next week.”

“I know,” Jutmoll said. In fact, that had been the first thing that occurred to him on hearing about Renate’s passing. It wasn’t exactly a surprise, by any means. He hadn’t known she was ill, but at her age, it didn’t take much to get from illness to being a former debate coach. For years he had been expecting to hear that she was retiring, and to learn about her succession plan, much as he was working on his own succession plan. Had she even had a succession plan?

“The school has asked me to take over the team and run the tournaments,” Buglaroni announced at the other end of the phone.

That was Renate’s succession plan? Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr.?

Welcome to the Bahamas.

“And,” Buglaroni continued, “I could really use your help. I mean, the tournaments are going to be next week.”

“Okay.” Jutmoll took a deep breath. It wasn’t just one tournament, it was two, and they were both extremely important. The Reconstruction Memorial was the first regional tournament of the year, and the Little Johnson had been the inaugural event for novices since time immemorial. Since Renate Screeds had been a mere lass...

“I’m not quite sure where to begin,” Buglaroni said.

Jutmoll nodded as he collected his thoughts. “Okay,” he repeated. “The first thing you need to do is get onto firmguns.com. All the registration info on both of the tournaments is there. Dude can get you plugged into it.”

“Uh, which dude is that, Mr. Jutmoll?”

“Oh, right. Dude Firmguns. That’s his name. It’s his website.”

“Do you have his address?”

“Just go to firmguns.com. Everything you need is there. Tell him what happened, and he’ll get you set up.”

“That’s all there is to it?”

“Hardly,” Jutmoll said. “That’s just the beginning. That’s just the registration. There’s also things like concessions and housing and judging and judge lounges and dinner service...” He thought for a second. “All of that would be handled by the parents of the team. The thing to do is call a meeting of the team and ask them which of their parents are assigned to which job, and then get in touch with the parents and see where they are and how they’re doing. With any luck, they’ll have everything under control.”

“And if they don’t?”

“If they don’t, Mr. Buglaroni, you are going to be in the deepest of the do-dos.”

“Oh.”

“Oh, indeed. Listen, you’ve got my number, obviously. Call me if you need anything. Anything at all. And meanwhile, get in touch with Dude and call a meeting of your team and see how things stand. Are you going to be at the Pup this weekend?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t thought ahead that far.”

“It’s three days from now, Hamlet.”

“Well, a lot can happen in three days.”

“Tell me about it. Anyhow, get in touch with Dude and sort out the team, and let me know how it goes.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mr. Jutmoll.”

“Don’t mention it.” He paused before clicking off. “And oh, welcome aboard, Hamlet.”

“Thanks, Mr. Jutmoll. It’s good to be aboard.”

Jutmoll clicked off his phone.

Hamlet Buglaroni was a teacher? And a debate coach? And a tournament director?

As Hautboy LeMonde would so aptly put it, *Mes etoiles!* Or better yet, *Mes e-[expletive deleted]-toiles!*

And the season had barely started.

Will Tarnish Jutmoll help save the tournaments at Andrew Johnson High School (“Home of the Unimpeachable Education”)?

Will Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., be able to get through to Dude Firmguns?

Are we sure that Renate Screeds is not just merely dead?

Will the Andy J team come through will all the information Buglaroni needs?

Did you finish reading all of series 1 like we told you to?

The answers are bubbling up in the Gulf in our next episode, “Is that an iPhone 4 or are you just happy to see me, or, does this mean that Bill Clinton was in the stands playing with his vuvuzela?”