



Series 2

Episode 26

Eat Your Heart Out, Macy's

And the parade begins.

They come from far and wide. In fact, there are some who come from so far and so wide that they already came, the fly-ins from Texas and California and the other states way off in the vastness. Those states out there, somewhere. For many of them, as for many closer registrants, the attraction of the tournament is not the tournament itself but the venue. Pup University, being an Ivy, attracts countless student moths to its bright light, all of them harboring a hope, nay, a belief, that they are potential matriculants in a year or two. But whereas anyone with the price of admission can participate in the Pups, becoming an actual Pup yourself is something else altogether. That many high school students conflate one with the other explains why, whether the tournament has run solid gold or intermittent dreck, its popularity has remained undiminished for all its years of operation. Now that Dude Firmguns is pressing all the buttons and pulling all the levers behind the curtain, it means that, nicely enough, it is mostly gold. But that's just a bonus. Most people are there to suck up the atmosphere of Neo-Gothic academia. Even the bid-stalkers are there to soak up that atmosphere. Everybody wants to be a Pup. Or some other Ivy Leaguer. Those who say otherwise? Well, my friend, they're jivin' you. Trust us on this.

While the long-distance arrivals, the advance guard of the parade, may have already checked into the Day's Ramalama EconoCot Express Inn, there are still plenty more to come. And for the most part, they come by bus.

“Is this Zeke?” Buglaroni says into his cellphone. There must be a hundred people coming and going in the Andrew Johnson administration office. He can barely hear anything from the other end of the line.

“Yeah, this is Zeke. Who’s this?”

“It’s Hamlet Buglaroni. From the debate team.”

“Oh. Right. Hammy. How ya doin’?”

“Oh, I’m doing fine, Zeke. How are you doing?”

“Doin’ great, Hammy. TGIF, right? Beautiful September day. What more could we ask for?”

“Well,” Buglaroni said, “I guess we could ask for a bus.”

“What’s that?”

“A bus,” Buglaroni repeated. “Our bus didn’t come this morning. It was supposed to be here at eight o’clock. It’s now twenty after. All the kids are ready to go, but no bus.”

“Eight o’clock? Bah!” Zeke’s “bah” sounded like something between a bark and the ejection of sinus fluid.

“Bah?” Buglaroni questioned, with neither the bark nor the fluid.

“It’s nine o’clock, Hammy, not eight o’clock. I told you that the last time we talked.”

“I thought you said eight o’clock.”

“Nine o’clock. It’s right here on the dispatch list, Hammy. Nine o’clock.”

Buglaroni was silent for a minute. Nine o’clock. Which meant the bus wasn’t late, only that he had gotten it wrong. Or maybe Zeke was pulling a fast one because he had gotten it wrong. There was no way of knowing, other than going back and reading that previous episode, which just wasn’t worth the trouble.

“Okay, Zeke. Thanks. Nine o’clock.”

“Nine o’clock, Hammy. You got it.”

Buglaroni clicked off his phone, smiled at the assistant principal who was standing at the public address console, readying herself to break into the early morning’s proceedings with one unnecessary announcement or

another, and walked out of the office. His team, twelve altogether, a mix of LDers and Policians, plus four judges, all Andy J graduates, were goofing around in the hallway, ready to go.

Buglaroni made a snap executive decision. “The bus people got it wrong. They’ll be sending down somebody as soon as they can. They thought it was nine o’clock.”

“Oh, man,” somebody moaned.

“Hey, we got out of the physics test,” somebody else said.

“And Mr. Bocciagalupe’s class,” somebody else added. That resulted in a couple of fist bumps.

“Bring your stuff outside,” said Buglaroni. “We’ll wait on the steps.”

There was a general shuffling to the side of the hallway, where enough luggage was stacked for a Napoleonic march on Moscow. Buglaroni figured that by the time they got this all outside, there might indeed be a bus waiting for them.

What a great start for his first tournament.

The parade also began at Veil of Ignorance High School.

One minute, the building was sealed shut. There was no sign of life anywhere. Not a bird in flight. Not a scurrying chipmunk. Not a drudging ant.

From the empty road where not even a Mini-Cooper could be seen, where not even one of those dumb Smart Cars was puttering along, where not even a bicyclist—nay, not even a unicyclist—could be seen, a coach bus materialized as if out of thin air and turned into the school driveway. At that very moment, the front door swung open and a man appeared, surveying the scene in his full semi-military attire from the gold ribbon of the epaulets on his field jacket down to the spit polish of his combat boots.

“On the bus!” Eric Rand-Walsh barked.

He stepped aside from the doorway. The first to emerge were the Seven Samurai, his coaching assistants, the seven college students recruited from the ranks of the former stars of the national circuit, now in thrall to Veil and to Rand-Walsh because no one anywhere could match the salaries that he paid them under the table. Each of the Samurai had enough of an

unshaven beard to prove his authenticity as a college student, if the beaten-up messenger bags and the ratty jeans and the Pavement tee shirts weren't enough proof already. Some of them carried water bottles; these were the ones who also carried serious hangovers. It's not easy being a college student surrounded by high schoolers, no matter how much you are paid for the privilege. And one of these Samurai had a secret, a connection to another team, which if it were known, could mark Veil of Ignorance's first seppuku. Or, hara-kiri to you, if you're too lazy to look up the formal written name for it.

Next came the usual fourteen Veilies, although they were not the same fourteen that went to the Monteverdi in Texas. Veil of Ignorance seemed to have an endless supply of debate cannon fodder. The first wave had already earned their TOC qualifications. Now the second wave was marching forth in aid of earning theirs.

The bus stopped at the base of the front stairs.

"Eyes front!" Rand-Walsh commanded as his students silently filed past him. They were already dressed in their combat attire, and looked exactly like the little lawyers they were.

"Juvey justice is not dumb," Rand-Walsh began.

"Juvey justice is not dumb," his team repeated in the rhythm.

"Their brains are simply very young."

"Their brains are simply very young."

"Their cerebella all are numb."

"Their cerebella all are numb."

"Affirm the res o lu shee un!"

"Affirm the res o lu shee un!"

Within five minutes, everyone except the commander was on the bus. Rand-Walsh took one last deep breath as he put his foot on the bottom stair.

"We have met the Pups," he muttered under his breath, "and they are ours!"

At Nighten Day, Hautboy LeMonde is casually strolling down the main hallway, his garment bag over one shoulder, pulling a small suitcase on wheels behind him. He has the air of the seasoned traveler heading toward the business class counter. In his bag are three suits: one suit for Saturday prelim rounds, and one suit for Sunday elimination rounds, and one extra suit if he decides that one of the other two suits won't suit, for whatever reason. He has a clean dress shirt and matching tie for every day of the week

in his suitcase, and four pairs of shoes. It is inconsequential that he is only competing two days. In Hautboy's opinion, style was as important as piece selection, and he worked equally hard at both.

"Mr. LeMonde!"

The voice stopped him. He turned around. "Mrs. Lupino." He gave her his broadest, I so-wish-I-were-staying-for-school smile.

"Would you come to my office please." It wasn't a question.

Hautboy couldn't imagine why the principal wanted to see him, especially with the stern attitude she was exuding, but it was probably just another weirdness of the day. He had already been unable to log on to his computer in the lab despite the best efforts of both himself and the teacher. As long as he got all the willies out of the atmosphere by tomorrow when he had to compete...

By the time he made it into her office, Principal Lupino was seated behind her desk. Hautboy still had his garment bag over his shoulder, and his suitcase handle in his hand. He stood in front of her, expectant.

She said nothing.

He stood a little more expectant. They were already loading the bus. Jutmoll had planned to leave at nine o'clock. It was early, but he was helping them run registration when they got there.

Principal Lupino shook her head, but still said nothing.

If Hautboy were standing any more expectant, he would probably give birth.

"I can't believe this of you, Mr. LeMonde," she finally said.

He couldn't imagine what she was talking about. He wasn't exactly a saint by any means, but he hadn't been exercising his skills as a sinner any time recently, at least not that he could recall. He tilted his head.

"Would you care to explain it?" she went on.

"Explain what?" He was sincerely without a clue.

"Would you explain why you were trying to get to these?" she said, pulling a sheet of paper out of her desk and handing it to him.

He read the list. His eyes widened. He kept reading. He grimaced. He finished reading and put the list on the desk in front of him. He felt a strange sensation in his nether parts.

Was the principal trying to seduce him?

"What do you have to say for yourself, Mr. LeMonde?"

He had never seen anything so vulgar in his entire life. He didn't know anything could even be so vulgar. And then... He picked up the list again. It wasn't just a list of things too vile to be repeated here: it was a list of websites too vile to be repeated anywhere. As an adolescent boy, he was

expected to be fairly conversant with this sort of material in general, but this was beyond even him. This was beyond...everybody.

And it was all online?

“I don’t understand,” he finally managed to say.

“That,” she said, pointing to the list that was back in his hand, “is a list of sites that you attempted to open on a school computer, Mr. LeMonde.”

He shook his head. “I never—”

“Don’t bother to deny it. The evidence is incontrovertible. There is no question. You tried to get onto those sites, on a school machine. Could you possibly explain why?”

“I never heard of any of these sites before!”

“That is far from an explanation, Mr. LeMonde.”

“I didn’t even know that these kinds of sites existed. I didn’t even know that this kind of *stuff* existed.”

“Then why were you trying to access it from a school computer?” She was beginning to repeat herself.

Hautboy put the list down again. That wasn’t him. He had his moments of daydreaming, but he had never daydreamed his way to a list of the most vile pornographic sites ever alluded to in a debate soap opera. As his mind slowly began to comprehend the specific nature of the sites, he decided that if this was what being an adult was all about, he might want to park it in childhood for the rest of his born days.

Yeech!

“I had nothing to do with those,” he said. “That wasn’t me.”

The principal stared at him. “If it wasn’t you, then would you mind telling me who was at your computer during the time you were logged in, when you were specifically noted as being in the computer lab?”

“When?”

“Two days ago, after school.”

He thought for a second. “I was there,” he admitted. “But I was doing theater research for a new piece. I wasn’t...there.” He pointed to the list.

“And you expect me to believe that?”

“Yes, I do. Because it’s true.”

“And you expect me to believe that your computer attempted to log into those sites all by itself?”

He had no answer to that. The computer couldn’t have done it itself, not even with the proverbial roomful of randy monkeys to type in random urls. And he sure as hell didn’t do it himself. And there was no way someone else could run...his...computer...

He let out a long breath. There was no other explanation. And, he immediately knew, no way he could convince the principal that he was telling the truth.

“I didn’t do it,” he insisted. “I don’t know how, and I don’t know why, but somebody else did it, and somehow they made it seem like I did it, or maybe it’s just the way the network understood it or something, but Mrs. Lupino, I swear to you, I didn’t do it.”

She began drumming her fingers on her desk. He took a quick glance out the window and saw the Pups bus at the front door. Everyone was probably on board by now, ready to go.

And here he was, because—and he had no doubt in his mind about this—Lily Maru had set him up. He didn’t know how, but he was absolutely certain of who. He didn’t have to ask why.

“I don’t know why I should believe you,” Mrs. Lupino said, “when all the evidence says otherwise.”

“You can believe me because it’s true,” Hautboy said. “That’s all I can tell you.”

She was still drumming her fingers. “You want to go to the Pups today?”

He nodded. No! She wasn’t suspend him from the team! Not today! She couldn’t do that! She mustn’t do that!

She seemed to bend a bit, as if physically coming to a conclusion.

“Go,” she told him.

“I can go?”

“That’s what I said. Go. And if you figure out how this could have happened, then you can let me know. Otherwise.” She paused. “Otherwise, I might have to take action that neither of us would like. If there is ever an incident like this again, no protestation of innocence on your part will be enough. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you.”

“Then go. Now. Before I change my mind.”

He was out of her office, down the hall and on the bus before the last word was out of her mouth.

Lily Maru. He would swear to it. And he would be damned if he wasn’t going to do something about it.

Mes etoiles!

Will the Andrew Johnson bus arrive by nine o'clock?

Will Eric Rand-Walsh discover the viper at Veil of Ignorance's breast?

Will Hautboy LeMonde kick the spite match with Lily Maru up another notch?

Will Glenn Beck take a long walk off a short pier?

Will the NFL change the November PF topic to, "Resolved, God told me the topic and you are damned well going to argue it"?

If you want the answers, visit your guru and not our next episode, "Are you a man or a Muppet, or, Elmo, you had your chance and you let her go, you id-eee-ot!"