



Series 2

Episode 28

This Dude Also Abides

There were pups everywhere.

According to firmguns.com, there were approximately 1500 participants competing in the Pup-a-Roni, making it one of the biggest tournaments in the country. Buildings all across the Pup campus would be drawn into service, sometimes from top to bottom, other times just a classroom here and a broom closet there. Traditionally LDers were the ones who got all the broom closets. They were used to it.

Dude Firmguns had spent countless hours parsing which rooms would go to whom, and when. You couldn't have an LD round and a Duo round and a policy round in the same room at the same time, and the plotting of the rooms required a complex spreadsheet that only an insurance agent could develop without breaking a sweat. And now Dude had an army of pups checking them all out, putting signs on doors, getting ready for the early evening when the festivities would commence. At the moment, most of the rooms were in use for classes or seminars or whatever mischief Pup Professors get up to during the daylight hours. Then, for three days, those rooms would belong to the Pup-a-Roni, except for the ones that got locked by mistake, or in which squatting professors demonstrated their territoriality for no other reason than that they had territory over which to ality. Such is

the way of academia. When these problems arose, a pup would be dispatched to the area with a key in hand, or a signed form demonstrating possession, and life would, eventually, go on.

Firmguns himself was setting up for the registration to come in the Chapel of the Holy Unwarranted Assumption. Tables for this, tables for that, tables for the other thing. There were forms to give to the registrants, which they would take a quick glance at and inevitably miss the errors they themselves had made. There were changes to be sent into the system, to the appropriate members of the tab teams in charge of that division. There were invoices to be adjusted, then invoices to be paid. There was one table entirely devoted to listening to excuses why the invoices that had been adjusted weren't going to get paid. There was a table for hired judges to check in and fill out their W9 forms. There were enough bottles of water to raise the Andrea Doria.

Registration was in the main body of the building. To the right, a tap dance class of indigent local seniors was taking place, led by two pups who had the enthusiasm usually reserved for Broadway openings. They sparkled with subtle rhinestones while their toes clicked with gunshot precision, while most of their aged class could barely get their walkers in position. To the left, an organ class was not going well, and a Bach cantata was more can't than ata, which is now the second split word that we've used in this section, which is really working this joke to death. One more time and we'll have to take up quilting.

Through it all, of course, Firmguns had his designated myrmidons, the four pups who were his main team for the weekend, namely Aphrodite Dirae, Alecto, Megaera and Tisiphone. Whenever it was necessary, one of them might peel off to the side, extract a cell phone, bark an order, and make something so, but most of the time they merely hovered around Firmguns, awaiting his commands. Dee—or Aphrodite—was also in charge of Dude's dinner plans, and she was waiting for his commands for both Friday and Saturday nights regarding who he would be dining with and what culinary mood he might be in; the bottles of Cristal had been verified as on ice and ready to go at every possible venue. Meanwhile, throughout Pup City there were teams of pups purchasing the food that would be sold at the concessions in half a dozen buildings, the Red Bull and the Diet Coke and

the Snickers bars and the Fritos and the Gummi Bears. Another team was at Staples buying ten boxes of paper, half a dozen printer cartridges of varying size and shape, and twenty rolls of masking tape. School bus drivers and custodians were being liberally bribed, with promises of even more liberality if everything came off well. At a dozen hotels surrounding the school, last minute preparations were being made for the onslaught, keys being printed, wireless instructions being stapled to the general instructions, cots rolled into wherever someone had remembered to order a cot. In another dozen hotels surrounding the school but from a much greater distance, the bulletproof glass was being tapped to make sure it would hold out until Sunday, the roll of toilet paper was being evaluated as being more than enough to last four people three days, if they didn't get too carried away with it, and in more than one back room, illegal immigrants were pouring dishwasher soap through funnels into tiny plastic bottles with fancy shampoo labels. Who would know? Not any fifteen year olds, that was for sure.

Dude Firmguns looked at his watch. At eleven twenty-three, everything in the chapel was in order. Fifty pups were poised at their posts, even though registration didn't officially open until 1:00.

Dude turned to Aphrodite Dirae. "Our work here is done," he announced in his thick New England accent.

Dee smiled at him. "Lunch?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Too early." He thought for a second. "Hot tub?" he suggested.

"Hot tub," she replied.

"And a light lunch to follow," he added. "We will need our strength when the afternoon rolls around."

Dee looked at the other three myrmidons. They clearly understood what they needed to do next. Coming two on each side, they walked Firmguns out the front door. The shortest of them was at least four inches taller than their tournament director.

They would be back in time for registration. And they would enjoy every minute in the meantime.

Ah, Youth

Raga Dikeskroner stepped down off the train in Pup City. It was a beautiful day, the sun shining, the air full of late summer warmth. He took a deep breath, and almost choked.

Okay. It was a nice day, but it *was* Pup City. Pup University was one thing, but its location left a lot to be desired. In fact, as locations went, it left everything to be desired. Dikeskroner, who had been in some pitiful cities in his long life, hadn't come across anything like this since 1847 in the principality of Roodoomba which, thankfully, no longer existed thanks to a series of three—no, four—revolutions, three coup d'états, two annexations and a partridge in a pear tree, if an earthquake that devoured the entire state, pulling it underground never to be seen again, could be compared to a partridge. Those were the good old days, Dikeskroner thought. Fifty thousand people swallowed whole by the earth, and nobody even missed them. Given that he had already had his fill of them by the time of the disturbance, and had moved on to Istanbul, even he didn't mind all that much. Especially given the smell of the place, at least after the second coup d'état. A smell not unlike Pup City, to get us back on track with our narrative.

The train station was not far from the university. Dikeskroner had studied the map and memorized the route. The city that accompanied the smell deserved its odor. As he walked he passed mostly deserted buildings and boarded-up storefronts. There was a hint of graffiti, but not much, as if the punks of the place didn't even have the energy to claim the leavings. There were homeless people gathered in the odd alley, but all of them were going about their business, leaving Dikeskroner to go about his. This was a shame, actually, as homeless people were one of his better sources of on-the-run nourishment, but then again, he wasn't going to be on the run for quite some time now, if things worked out the way he was planning it. Once he attached himself to Tarnish Jutmoll as an heir apparent, he would be on his way to...well, he wasn't sure what. Young people were new to him. Who knew that they would lead to?

It was easy for him to recognize the change in the environment as he neared the campus. The buildings started looking lived in, more affluent,

more vibrant. The people started looking less homeless. Some of them looked like basic working stiffs, going about their business, installing this, checking that, moving the other thing. People in ties with cell phones appeared to be plotting the takeover of Facebook, Microsoft and Google all at once. Other people, younger and scruffier looking but also with cell phones, looked as if they were plotting to hack into Facebook, Microsoft and Google all at once.

And that was the key to the change. The youth. The people were getting younger.

And damn if Raga Dikeskroner didn't feel the change in his blood. Literally.

It was like stepping into a hot, humid summer day from an air conditioned building. You were hit by the heat, by the wet, by the force of it. You slowed your step. You started noticing everything around you.

You started to feel the youth that was now all around you.

Dikeskroner turned a corner, and there he was, in the middle of a commercial area on the west side of the campus. College students were bustling all around him. There was a Starbucks in front of him, with seven people on line and forty others scattered around at its tables with laptops and iPhones and, remarkably enough, newspapers.

Dikeskroner could taste the youth.

He kept walking toward the campus. He had a light backpack over his shoulders, just enough clothing to get him through the weekend, plus his small laptop computer. He passed unchallenged through a gate that took him straight into the middle of a quadrangle surrounded by dormitories and classrooms and young, vibrant, warm-blooded students.

Warm. Blooded Students.

Raga Dikeskroner had to stop walking for a moment. Why had it taken him so long to discover young people? He could feel them, he could feel his own pulse racing in time to their strong, firm, racing pulses.

Oh my God, he thought. This is heaven.

And this is just college students.

What would it be like when the high school students arrived?

He found a bench and sat down. His head was spinning.

And he was ready. Very, very ready.

He closed his eyes. All he had to do now was wait.

Yo' Mama

Chief among the indignities that most debaters cannot tolerate, but often have no choice but to endure, is Mom. This was the indignity through which Kennerji Allawalla was now suffering.

As the lone debater from his school, he had fought with the administration during his novice year for months before they acknowledged that he had the right to attend debate tournaments even though he wasn't doing so on his school's dime. He could officially represent his school as long as they didn't have to officially pay for it. Since his parents were firm believers in forensics as a builder of both brain and character, this worked out fine.

Most tournaments required an adult chaperone, and Kennerji's mother, a venture capitalist consultant whose time was her own, was always willing to oblige. Also, most tournaments usually allowed contestants to purchase judges from the tournament organizers, and again Kennerji's mother was always happy to oblige and pay the extra expense. Occasionally, however, Kennerji's mother was forced to act as a judge. And although she was once again happy to oblige, the students she judged were not happy that she was so obliging. The problem was that Kennerji's mother had an Indian accent as thick as a moose. That her mastery of English was superb, that she in fact was a graduate of Christchurch in Oxford, that she had even debated herself in international venues, did not matter. She sounded like a foreigner. Therefore, as far as the debate community was concerned, she didn't speak English, even though she spoke better English than most of the debate community. For example, she did not use the word "like" in place of commas, and when she talked quickly, she didn't sputter like an outboard motor in a state of ill repair. But these were not relevant facts. She sounded Indian. The only person most debaters would prefer even less to see in the back of the room was Clarence Thomas. And to some of them, even he would be preferable.

At the Pups, not only was Mom going to be Kennerji's chaperone, but also his judge. Because there was mutual judge preferences, and all the students would be ranking all the judges, the likelihood of any student ranking Mom Allerwalla anything higher than a six—a strike—was virtually nil, which meant that the only rounds she would be judging were among those teams that hadn't ranked at all, which comprised Catholic schools where the administrations labored under the mistaken belief that the Pope had issued an encyclical condemning MJP, goober schools that didn't know what MJP was, and goombah schools without the brainpower to get their preferences into the system in time. Which meant that, for Mom Allerwalla, the Pup-a-Roni was destined to be a battle between the goobers, the goombahs and the altar boys.

And, to make matters worse, the goobers and the goombahs and the altar boys would all blame Kennerji when they saw his mother in the back of the room. And Kennerji wasn't exactly on solid social ground to begin with, in that he had suffered from pangs of insecurity ever since he was old enough to know what pangs were. He needed more pangs like he need Clarence Thomas in the back of the room.

And, to make matters even more worse, Kennerji and his mother were sharing a room at the Day's Ramalama EconoCot Express Inn in Pup City, a level of chaperonage bordering on the Guantanamo Prison Camps.

And finally, to make matters the absolute worst and this is the end of it, this was the weekend that Kennerji had sworn to himself that he was going to let Tucker Gallstone know his true feelings for her. Which, his insecurities persuaded him, was an act of social suicide from which he might never recover.

"Which bed do you want?" Kennerji's mother asked him as she unlocked the door to their motel room.

"I'll take the one closest to the firing squad," he responded.

Kennerji's mother, who was used to Kennerji by now, shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed furthest from the door.

Where was Clarence Thomas when you needed him?

Will Dude Firmguns and his Furies return in time to run registration?

Will Raga Dikeskroner be able to survive when the high school students arrive?

Will Mom Allerwalla judge nothing but goobers, goombahs and altar boys?

Is the rent too damn high, or are you too damn small?

Can you believe that after next week, we won't have to listen to these idiot politicians running for office anymore,—although we will, of course, have to listen to them when they're in office?

The answers to these questions, and so many more, cannot be Googled in our next episode: “If everybody in France really retired at the age of 62, who would be left to take the entire month of August off for summer vacation, or, I, for one, really wish Elvira *was* a witch.”