



Series 2

Episode 6, Part One: Oh What a Beautiful Morning, my ass!

The bus to Nighten Day High School began picking up students at six-thirty in the morning. Given the alertness of high school students at six-thirty in the morning, this was tantamount to herding zombies out of their houses and into whatever large vehicle was the first to appear on their street corners. School bus, garbage truck, hearse—it wouldn't make any difference. The students would enter, unseeing and take a seat, if any, uncaring.

It wasn't that six-thirty in the morning was a bad time for high school students so much as the fact that six-thirty in the morning simply didn't exist for them. Most of them wouldn't be awake for at least another hour. That their bodies were in motion was mere anecdotal evidence of their consciousness, and could not even be accepted at face value.

Except for Tucker Gallstone.

"Hey, Billy," she said, as Billy Muffle made the walk of death down the center aisle of the bus toward an empty seat.

His head moved in her direction but his eyes registered nothing. He collapsed on the seat across from her.

"You start working on your cases yet?"

His expression remained unchanging. "Cases?" he muttered.

"Your cases," she repeated. "Have you started working on them yet?"

"You mean for debate?"

"No, I mean for cafeteria. Of course I mean for debate! What other cases are there?"

"I just joined the team," he protested weakly.

"You've got to start working early if you want to be any good. Have you thought about them, at least?"

He stared at her. “Are you crazy?” He turned away and slumped down into his seat and closed his eyes.

“Damned novices!” Tucker said. She reached into her pack and pulled out her computer. She had half an hour before the bus arrived. She could work on her aff a bit more. It needed the work, because it wasn’t perfect yet. Come to think of it, it would never be perfect.

And she would work on it over and over again anyhow. That and half a dozen alternative cases.

Because that was the way Tucker Gallstone was.

Billy Muffle could not believe that he was on a school bus at this time in the morning. Last year, at middle school, he had left home over an hour later. He had felt like he was able to get some sleep during the night. But high school? Obviously sleep didn’t figure into the equation. Not even on the bus, where people like Tucker were already pestering him to start writing cases.

If it wasn’t his mother, it was the girl from down the street. What was it with these people and debate, anyhow?

Billy had a vision of high school, gleaned from television and movies and what he had heard from older kids, cousins and friends and general acquaintances. High school was good because you started to live your own life. You did what you wanted to do, and your parents didn’t even fight you on it all that much because this was the time you were supposed to be growing up, and they understood that and mostly let you have at it, provided that you didn’t get arrested for car theft or drug dealing or something else really idiotic. Not that Billy intended to take up the life felonious any time soon. He was a more reserved person altogether. In fact, he was altogether reserved to the very core. He was happiest being left alone, and was equally happy leaving others alone. The quiet life suited him enormously.

So why debate? All right. He’d admit it. It wasn’t the intellectual challenge. Not that Billy didn’t think of himself as smart, but he knew he was no genius, and certainly no natural debater. He was no Tucker Gallstone, in other words. But one thing that Mr. Jutmoll had talked about had intrigued Billy more than anything else. Travel. Getting away from your family.

Getting away from your family...

His bratty sister, for one thing. Yak yak yak yak yak. Intense, no. Annoying? Endlessly.

His father? Well, Dad didn’t say much one way or the other, so he’d probably never even notice that Billy wasn’t in the house. Billy was a lot like his father, at least in that way.

His mother? Well, she was like the opposite of his sister. Annoying, no. Intense? Endlessly. On his case all the time, telling him that he needed more ambition, more drive, more direction in his life.

Debate would work with his mother. It would demonstrate direction to her.

And get him out of the house at the same time, literally taking that direction.

He opened his eyes. Across from him, Tucker Gallstone was working away on her computer.

“What’s the resolution?” he called out to her.

“Capital punishment,” she responded without looking at him. “That’s the novice topic, that is.”

“What’s the varsity topic?”

“Juvenile justice.”

He closed his eyes again. Capital punishment. Yeah, he could get behind that. Send all the bad guys off to Old Sparky and let ‘em fry.

“You’ve got to argue both sides,” he heard Tucker say through the mist of his half sleep, as if she were reading his mind.

Both sides? Damn. Frying criminals was one thing. Letting them walk? He didn’t know about that.

The bus continued to roll along. Billy did manage to fall asleep a couple of times before they arrived at the school, getting jolted back awake each time the bus hit a bump or made a turn.

Whose idea was this high school thing anyhow, he asked himself as the bus finally drew to a halt in front of Nighten Day. He pulled his eyes open and stood up.

Tucker Gallstone was still typing away.

Welcome to the Bahamas...

Episode 6, Part Two: Here be Dragons!

Meanwhile...

Not all teams are small.

Not all teams are lucky to have five or ten newbies a year.

Not all teams are a mix of the dedicated and the dubious.

Not all teams. Not by any means.

Some teams are nothing but dragons.

Like Veil of Ignorance High School, for instance.

The history of Veil is complicated. Once a lead policy school, somewhere toward the end of the nineties it lost its way in team debate, until by the mid-2000s, it was nothing but a couple of Speechies doing a humorous Duo, a two-person piece they had cut from *Tropic of Capricorn*.

How the mighty had fallen.

At its forensic height, their coach, Seth B. Obomash, who had achieved debate god status, had been picked up by a Florida vice squad during a tournament and as a result subsequently lost his job at Veil. He had, for a while, freelance coached, until finally landing a new position as a researcher for Fox News. He did still occasionally show up at tournaments as a judge, for old time's sake, and he regularly blogged about the activity, filling a much-needed gap in debate gossip writing. But he had no more connections to Veil of Ignorance.

His successor, a young woman named Lisa Torte, had attempted to take the team from its policy roots to LD. She too had lost her job when she married one of her students. This was much more innocent than it sounds, in that he was of legal age, and she was barely out of college, but then again, in the eyes of most people, that's also pretty damned guilty. If Ms. Torte were to give any advice to anyone in high school forensics, it would be to keep your love life separate from your debate life, even when it's not strictly illegal. She had not done so, and had paid the price. She was now working as an assistant manager at a Gap outlet out on the southern end of Long Island. She was also divorced from her husband, Bill "Invoice" O'Connor, who had gone on to an internet startup outside of Portland, Oregon, that specialized in iPhone apps for veterinarians.

After Lisa Torte, the forensics program at Veil had foundered. Coachless, it had drifted for a couple of years until finally disappearing almost completely.

Until Eric Rand-Walsh appeared, that is.

Eric Rand-Walsh had been a star in his own right as a high school forensician. He had originally intended to go into law, but had grown disenchanted with the idea somewhere around the middle of his college career, and after dabbling in computer science for a while, had decided instead to go into education. The computer science gave him something valuable to teach, the education degree gave him the means to teach it, and his history as a forensician gave him an innate interest in reviving the old Veil of Ignorance debate team.

And that's exactly what he had done.

Four years ago, there was no Veil of Ignorance debate team. The trophies had been removed from the glass shelves. The memory had been

completely erased from the school by the Jesuits who ran it. The principal—who was hired the same year as Rand-Walsh and who therefore had no personal memory of the activity at the school—on hearing that Rand-Walsh wanted to bring debate back to the student body, gave the idea his blessing. As far as most people were concerned, Veil of Ignorance did not have a history of sex criminals and pseudo sex criminals on its debate coaching staff, because that history had been completely buried.

Eric Rand-Walsh was empowered to start from scratch.

And that is what he did.

And in four years, he had created a debate empire. Without a single sex criminal. Which, at Veil of Ignorance, was a major accomplishment.

Then again, Eric Rand-Walsh had early on learned the secret to success at Veil of Ignorance High School. It was based on two universal truths.

One: Never underestimate the amount of money mother church is willing to spend on crushing the competition. Any competition. Ever. All that pent-up Inquisition rage had had to go somewhere.

Two: Never underestimate the amount of money upper middle class parents are willing to spend on their high school children if they think there will be a payoff of an Ivy League college at the end of their graduation rainbow.

In the building of his empire, Rand-Walsh had known that he alone was not enough. Oh, he had been successful in his day, but in debate, it takes more than just one savvy coach to build a successful fighting machine. So he had begun hiring assistants. Lots of them. Every time a successful debater graduated high school, Eric Rand-Walsh was there with an exclusive contract to work with Veil debaters however much they could. Need plane tickets? Got 'em. Need concert tickets? Dinner? Breakfast? Hotel rooms? Got 'em, got 'em, got 'em. Just hand in the bill to the school, or pass the expense along to the parents.

One assistant coach. Two assistant coaches. Three. Four. Until, finally, seven assistant coaches, working out of universities all across the country. The seven assistant coaches of Veil of Ignorance. Or as they were known throughout the circuit, the Seven Samurai.

And four years after he started, Eric Rand-Walsh's debate empire ruled the northeast. And parts of the southeast, southwest, northwest, midwest, and anywhere else you can find on the compass.

As we said...

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Will Billy Muffle successfully get away from his mother?

Will Billy wake up in time for his first class?

Will Tucker Gallstone ever write what she considers a good case?

Will Eric Rand-Walsh's team win every event in the country?

Is there something in the water at Veil of Ignorance that turns its coaches into deviates?

Where do they sell that water, anyhow?

The answers to these and many other questions, including the solution to Fermat's last theorem and why the sea is boiling hot, will be totally ignored in our next episode: "If the TV show 'Lost' were any good, they would have done their philosopher names as anagrams, or, I'm sorry, I just don't think of him as a philosopher. Some people don't even think of him as a scientist. I mean, it's only a theory, right?"