



Episode 1

The Young and the Clueless

At six o'clock in the morning, autumnal fog and darkness blend over the roads, and travel is difficult. The car's intermittent wipers scratch the mist off the windshield, while the not yet heated air of the defroster feebly blows against the inside of the frosted glass. Keeping one hand on the wheel, the driver swipes an area clear with a paper towel so that he can gain at least a glimpse of the road ahead of him.

"Are these things always this early?" he mutters.

"Some are worse than others, I think," his passenger responds.

"It would have killed you to take up an afternoon activity?" the driver asks.

"Like what? Football? Sure."

The driver takes a quick look at his son and responds with a sagelike grunt. Football was definitely out. Debating, perhaps, was in.

"How many others are going?" the man asks.

"There's three other novices. We'll go on the bus together and meet up with the rest of the team down there."

"Those are the older kids?"

"Yeah. They started debating yesterday. They usually do overnights. But when we start out, we just do one day tournaments."

"When do you start doing overnights?" the man asks. He can already envision not having to wake up again at five a.m. on a Saturday to trek Ham Junior over to the high school again. Overnights would mean sleeping in. Yes!

"I don't know."

"Doesn't the coach tell you anything?"

Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr., shakes his head. "The coach doesn't talk to novices. We are not worthy."

Ham Senior grunts again. He can remember the so-called mystique of coaches and their teams from his own high school days as a star fullback. The coach was supposed to reach down into your soul and pull up the best you were, using techniques that combined Jesuitical wiles with mountain man orneriness and that led to the kid worshipping the ground which the coach spat his tobacco chaw on. Ham Senior had never worshipped his coach, old Mr. Groiner, but that was the result of the scandal with the junior high kids.

"I'll have to call you to let you know when we get back," Ham Junior says. "They say we never know when we'll get here until we get here."

"I'll be glued by the phone, waiting," his father replies. "Try not to make it too late. I want to get Chinese for dinner."

"Sometimes they eat on the way home."

"Great. So what about me?"

"Get Chinese and eat yours and heat up the rest for me when I get home."

"What if you call while I'm out getting the food?"

"Ah, well..."

"Ah, well, indeed. Jeez."

The car makes the turn onto Main Street. Even though the school is only a few hundred yards ahead, perched high on a hill and always brightly lighted, like a sentry overlooking the old mill town of Nighten, New York, it cannot be seen through the thick fog.

"What a morning," Ham Senior says.

As they drive slowly down Main Street, the school begins to come into view above them. The yellow central tower first, glowing in its misty spotlights. Then each progressive story from the third floor down materializes one after the other, like layers of a cake

arranged in reverse order. Finally the whole old, ugly building is visible as Ham Senior pulls up the driveway. It hasn't changed one chipped flake of jaundice-colored paint since he graduated there twenty-six years ago. Old Yeller, they used to call it. A concrete sign on their left announces the official name of the place, Nighten Day School; below the name plastic letters in the marquee spell out "Welcome Homecoming Grads," a reminder of last week's big game against arch-rival T.L. High. T.L. had been their arch-rival when Ham Senior was a fullback. They had lost his four years straight.

Nothing ever changes. They'd lost this year too.

In front of the building, a small school bus is puffing diesel exhaust fumes into the air. Ham Senior pulls up behind it and stops the car. Ham Junior pushes his door open.

"Good luck," his father tells him.

"Good luck," Ham Junior replies distractedly, as he draws himself out of the car. In the moment of making that exit he completely traverses the nameless gap that separates the world of family and child from the world of school and self. He is no longer Ham Junior. He is no longer Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Jr. Not really. Now he is a new person, one word, simply Buglaroni.

Buglaroni.

He slams the car door behind him and walks to the front of the bus. Buglaroni. Thirteen years old, five feet ten inches tall and unable to push the scale over 130 pounds even fully dressed and having just eaten his grandmother's infamous lasagna. He's wearing his favorite cap -- it's red, tightly fitted around his head, and it says nothing, which he considers a major statement. A dark blue blazer that he bought three weeks ago already hangs on his lean frame like a hand-me-down from a shorter deceased relative who wouldn't be needing it anymore. His chinos, which he should have bought three weeks ago along with the blazer but he swore to his grandmother that he had plenty of pants already and they fit fine, come down to about four inches above his heels, providing a wide gap to display his brown and green argyle socks, which he wears over an additional pair of white tube socks. Buglaroni always wears two pairs of socks, when he wears socks at all. His belt -- oh, he forgot to put on a belt this morning. He does that a lot. His black penny loafers, borrowed from his father, are the only things he's wearing, excluding probably his underwear (which we won't get into, but thank God he did), that actually fit properly. And last, there is the tie that hangs unknotted under the frayed collar of his button-down white shirt. At its base it is three inches wide and displays a full color portrait of Captain Jean-Luc Picard. In his left hand is a battered brown backpack, containing all the worldly goods he's been advised to bring with him for his tournament debut.

Buglaroni.

The bus door opens to accept him within its welcoming confines. He steps up into the dry warmth of the magical chariot on which will he begin his quest into the unknown frontiers of high school debating. The driver, chewing on the edge of a bagel held within a sheet of folded wax paper, studiously ignores him, as drivers do. In the back of the bus, the other three freshman novice debaters are already assembled. They look up at him silently as he makes his way down the aisle to join them.

"Hey," he says in greeting as he tosses his backpack onto an empty seat and plops himself down next to it.

"Buglaroni," one of the Tarelton twins -- Frick -- responds unenthusiastically. The bus shakes for a moment, then pulls off with a jolt.

"I was up, like, forever last night," Buglaroni says, reaching into his backpack and pulling out a yellow legal pad. "Anybody have an affirmative case I can copy?"

The Tarleton twins exchange glances. In the seat in front of them, Camelia Maru lowers her eyes to her hands folded in her lap.

Hamlet P. Buglaroni, the Novice from Hell, has arrived.

Will Buglaroni take top honors at his first tournament?

Will Scarlet go to the picnic with the Tarleton twins?

How long do we have to wait before we introduce Cartier Diamond?

What does any of this have to do with Immanuel Kant?

Find out the answers, sort of, in our next installment -- "Exploring the Categorical Imperative with Gun and Camera."