



Episode 13

The Envelope, Please

At five-thirty in the afternoon, Tarnish Jutmoll is ready to go home. He has just come from the tab room, and he knows how the day will end. So now he wants it to end and be done with it.

But first, there's the awards ceremony.

The auditorium of Andrew Johnson High School is seething with unfocussed activity. All the debaters have returned from their debating, or their card games, or their Frisbee games, or whatever they've been doing to fill the up the afternoon, to congeal here with their teammates to await the results. A few will take home trophies; those who participated in the out rounds of the Reconstruction Memorial already know they are winners, and some of them have even returned to their debater costumes, if it is the tradition of that school to do so. For the rest, including all the participants in the Little Johnson, plus the Reconstruction finalists, this will be the moment of truth.

The Nighten Day team is sitting together at the front left of the auditorium, a position they usually take no matter what the school, the nine of them including their coach taking up four rows. Tarnish is alone in the fourth row, trying to find a comfortable position for his sore leg muscles. In the third row are the Tarleton twins and Hamlet Buglaroni; the Tarletons are still in their Future Industrialists of America suits, while Buglaroni has grown progressively more disheveled as the day has progressed. Now his shirt tail is out except for one inch still tucked into his pants above his left hip, the top two buttons of his shirt are undone, and his fly is unzipped to about half mast. He is beating a notebook in time to the music of his headphones. In the second row are the Maru girls. Camelia never changed her clothes, and Jasmine has changed back into her suit, since she has earned an octofinalist trophy, and Jutmoll is one of those coaches who believe that a trophy should only be accepted in serious attire. Finally, in the front row, are Trat Warner and Ellie DiBella, practically in each other's laps, and Griot Goldbaum, the last of the Nighten Dayers still dressed up. Griot was one of the two Reconstruction finalists. Griot Goldbaum versus Had Fleece of Toulouse Lautrec. Only Jutmoll and a handful of

other coaches know the results of their round. As for Cartier Diamond and Morrie Prentice, some time recently they must have driven off into the sunset. For good, if Tarnish Jutmoll could have his say about it.

Jutmoll has spent most of the afternoon judging. While some coaches look at judging with enormous disdain, as something only to be done by lesser mortals (except in ceremonial situations -- debate coaches are big on ceremonial situations), Jutmoll regularly likes to get his legal pad dirty, as he calls it. He enjoys knowing firsthand the abilities of the competition, putting personalities to the names and faces, and he feels it is important for him to hear what the other teams are running, especially early in the life of a resolution, which is usually around two months. But mostly he enjoys debate for its own sake: two smart, well-prepared kids arguing big issues. It is something teenagers are especially adept at, an interest in issues bigger than themselves, which is a calling adults often forego in the process of being grown up. And besides, Jutmoll thinks, if you don't like debating, what's the point of coaching in the first place?

Of course, Jutmoll does try to limit his judging to the elimination rounds. Anyone and everyone can participate in the preliminary rounds, and often two debaters meet who couldn't argue their way out of a hamburger at a vegetarian convention, and the results are unenlightening for all involved. But the eliminations exclude the inexperienced and the inept -- usually -- leaving only those who know what they're doing. Occasionally a ringer breaks through, a student who should never have taken up the activity in the first place, but mostly the out round debates are what Jutmoll considers dependable entertainment. The alternatives -- playing gin rummy with Hamlet P. Buglaroni or hobnobbing with his fellow coaches beyond the bounds of minimal courtesy -- are neither particularly appealing to him. The former is too preposterous, and the latter is too predictable. No, give Tarnish Jutmoll a good debate round any day, and he'll definitely be a very happy man.

The arrival of Dan Ryan on the auditorium stage is an instant signal for the noise in the room to subside, and for everyone standing to sit down. Ryan doesn't have to raise a finger to get this reaction; the old-timers recognize him immediately and know that the festivities are about to begin, which the newbies get the message through osmosis from their older teammates. On the stage behind Ryan is a table lined with the trophies du jour, which differ little from one high school to the next, a few rows of winged Nikes arranged in size places, from eight octofinalists to one winner in each division. This time there are the additional Little Johnson trophies -- smaller Nikes altogether, but nonetheless in growing size depending on placement -- plus a pile of gavels, which will be handed out as speaker awards.

But we'll get to that in a moment. Because now Dan Ryan is clearing his throat.

"Before starting this awards ceremony, we would like to thank a few people," he begins.

His voice is barely above a whisper, and the idea that he may in fact be involved in a public speaking activity once again bubbles to the surface consciousness of anyone who has ever heard him in public before. He then begins a litany of hosannas to parents, teachers, principals, custodians, bus drivers, judges, his fellow Americans, the Pope, Charles A. Lindbergh, and anyone else he can think of. As he talks, Renate Screeds, the actual Andrew Johnson coach and the tournament director of record, shuffles out on to the stage to stand beside the trophies. Rail thin and older than justice, she begins to absentmindedly pet one of the larger trophies while watching in admiration as Ryan continues.

"After the ceremony," Ryan says, "you can pick up your packets with the ballots at the back of the auditorium. And now, we'll give the results of the Little Johnson."

Jutmoll, who knows these results as well as the results of the Memorial, brings his attention over to his novices. If Buglaroni even shows up for another meeting, he thinks, it will be a miracle. The Tarleton twins seems to be in for the duration, and he thinks he might be able to make something of them someday. And as for Camelia, she has been the color of blanched spinach all day, and has obviously hated every minute of the experience. She will be the most interesting case of all for him.

"We'll do policy first," Ryan says.

He starts by giving out gavels as speaker awards. Although policy is a two-person activity, each individual gets his own separate ranking of speaker points irregarding winning or losing or the ability of that person's partner. This is to recognize individual achievement even when your partner is a total disaster. Ten gavels are given, in reverse order from tenth to first place. The audience claps perfunctorily as each is announced, and the winning students, all of whom are debuting novices, jump up and receive their awards with the enthusiasm of total surprise. Since no one except their immediate teammates know who these people are, their histrionics are unafecting to the crowd at large.

"We have awards from sixth to first place in team debate," Ryan says. And he announces those six winning teams, again in reverse order, again evoking the enthusiasm from the winners and the ennui and perfunctory applause of the onlookers. This time the rankings are by win-loss record, with total speaker points only figuring as tie-breakers.

"And now Lincoln-Douglas. Again we have six awards."

There are no speakers' gavels in LD. One at a time Dan Ryan announces the names of the winners. None of the first five are from Nighten Day.

"And in first place, undefeated and with a total of 89 out of 90 speaker points, from Nighten Day, is Camille Maro."

So he gets the name wrong. Camelia knows who he means. And rises shocked from her seat, her hands at her mouth. Jutmoll imagines that she is about to cry.

Yes, she will be the most interesting case of all for him.

Camelia walks up to the stage in an obvious daze. There is a momentary confusion over which hand of Renate Screeds's to shake and whether to shake it first before accepting the trophy and which hand to take the trophy in. But Camelia manages to accomplish her mission, and returns to Jasmine, who gives her a warm hug. Finally Camelia collapses on her seat clutching her trophy.

So much for the Little Johnson.

Renate Screeds steps forward and changes places with Dan Ryan. She will do the honors announcing the Reconstruction Memorial winners, while this time it will be Ryan who hands over the trophies.

Miss Screeds's voice is sharp and loud as it cuts through the auditorium. Like Ryan, she begins with the Policy winners. First the ten speakers come up, then all the teams that broke are called to the stage and given their awards in order of placement: the octofinalists, the quarterfinalists, the semifinalists, and finally, the final finalists. In all the instances except the final finalists, everyone already knows the results. But the final round results are traditionally kept secret until the awards ceremony, and the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial is not a tournament to break with tradition. On the stage now are four debaters, the two teams who have finished their final round barely fifteen minutes ago. There is a perfunctory chorus of hand-shaking among them. One team is male, the other is split down the middle (male/female, that is -- don't let your imagination wander too much).

"And in a three-two decision," Miss Screeds reveals, "the second place finisher is Toulouse Lautrec, Fab Beeter and Kush Behar."

The two boys give a momentary sag of the shoulders at learning they have come in second, then shake their coach's hand as Ryan hands one of them the single winner's trophy (which, by the way, they will return to him on the bus ride home, as all T-L trophies become the property of the school's display cabinet).

"And in first place," Miss Screeds announces, "from Veil of Ignorance, Tara Petskin and Bill O'Connor."

As the words are spoken, everyone in the auditorium -- with the exception of some of the novices, who have to be physically prodded -- stands up and applauds. The standing

ovation for first place is another long-standing forensic tradition, the acknowledgment of the prowess of the person or team who has beaten all the others, at least today. A novice one-day affair, like the Little Johnson, never merits such acclaim. You have to sleep over to get your opponents to stand up for you.

While they're standing, Jutmoll looks over to see the gargantuan Seth B. Obomash beaming proudly, slapping his left palm with his right hand while his left hand fingers do their best to keep their grasp on a bag of nacho chips. Seth enjoys nothing more than seeing one of his teams come in first place. Nothing, except maybe breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Jutmoll thinks with a slight shake of his head.

After the applause slackens, Miss Screeds turns to the Lincoln Douglas awards. All the breakers come up to the stage, and again she starts with the octofinalists. This group includes Jasmine, whose expression is stony as she accepts her award. Jutmoll is happy that she has begun the year with a trophy, but cannot figure out why she seems so miserable about it. Jasmine usually does appear to him to be miserable, but moments like this usually evince at least a tiny lessening of her eternal frown. Something must have happened today, but he has no idea what. Maybe it has something to do with her sister taking a first. Is this the beginning of some complex sibling rivalry?

Great. He really needs that.

Next on the stage are the quarterfinalists, and then the semifinalists. And then, finally, only the final LD finalists are left. Griot Goldbaum and Had Fleece.

Jutmoll has mixed emotions about this situation. He has learned over the years that there is little difference between the skills of the top finishers in a tournament. For that matter, there aren't all that many differences in all of the breakers. They're all good, and anyone can have a hot day and beat all the rest. But there are a few killers, who almost always have that hot day, and both Griot and Had are among them. Even though Jutmoll knows who the winner is, that does not alleviate the sense of excitement in the room, that affects even him.

"And in a four one decision," Miss Screeds begins.

Griot and Had are shaking hands. Four one, Jutmoll thinks. That's a tough loss. Not as bad as a five oh, but not as subtly more satisfying as the still disappointing three two.

"A great round. In second place, from Toulouse Lautrec High School, Had Fleece."

There is strong applause -- Had is well-known and well-liked -- as he shakes his coach's hand and takes his trophy. He walks off the stage in the direction opposite to where Nighten Day is sitting.

"And the winner of the Lincoln Douglas division of the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial, from Nighten Day School, is Griot Goldbaum."

Again everyone is on their feet. Griot accepts what is not his first winning trophy and, after shaking both Renate Screeds's hand and Dan Ryan's hand -- Griot is an excellent politician as well as an excellent debater -- he walks back to join his team. As he does so, Jutmoll is startled to see Jasmine jump out of her chair and hug Griot warmly, a big grin on her face.

Jasmine and Griot? No way. But he's never seen Jasmine so happy in her life.

Will wonders never cease?

"Grab the packet," Jutmoll says to Buglaroni, rising. "We're going home."

"What's a packet?" Buglaroni asks.

Jutmoll closes his eyes and thinks of pleasant things in pleasant places.

The first tournament of the year is over.

Will Had Fleece and Griot Goldbaum meet again in a final round?

Will Jasmine start dating Griot out of spite?

Will Seth B. Obomash find a restaurant on the way home?

Will Apple ever get tired of U2?

Will Spam ever replace falafels?

Find out next time as we prep for the Messerschmitt College tournament, in a restful episode entitled: "Mashed Potatoes and the Agony of the Feet."