



Episode 2

All My Debaters

Jasmine Maru stands quietly next to the glass doors, watching the cars and buses pulling up to the front of the building. A steady stream of people enters and exits, letting in the first breezes of October that point the way toward winter, mixing that cool, slightly damp outside air with the blasts of mechanical heat generated from within the school. Jasmine ignores the ping-ponging climatological conflict and concentrates on the arriving students.

Most of them are coming by automobile. Or at least by private vehicle, since most contemporary drivers seem to prefer the overgrown, gas-guzzling sort of jeep that bears down on the road with all the grace of a charging rhinoceros. Jasmine stiffens slightly at the thought of the pollution, the waste, the gross display of petty bourgeois values. At the end of the walkway leading up to the door five girls tumble down from one of these boxy monstrosities, tossing out sleeping bags and backpacks and suitcases and the other paraphernalia of the transient teenage house guest. They wave thanks at the driver, who pulls off back into the yuppie nightmare. And another group of happy debaters has been returned to the scene of the crime, and the family that has housed them can feel it's been useful until the next year rolls around and someone asks them to volunteer again.

There are two kinds of major debate tournaments, each with four or five or even more rounds, stretching over a span of at least two days. At high schools, like this one -- New Jersey's very own Andrew Johnson High School, "Home of the Unimpeachable Education" -- participants are housed by the local gentry. Two or four or six or however many debaters can be fit onto a stretch of open flooring are picked up at the school after the last round has ended on Friday and taken off into the night by the strangers who have been goaded into helping out by the parent volunteers in charge of tournament housing. The unspoken rules preventing headlines from being made in the morning are that no fewer than two students may be housed together, and never with a lone, single adult. Some schools supplying the competitors being housed have additional, more stringent rules: some are as simple as housing by gender, others are as complex as the coach following the suburban jeep home and verifying a house to go with it, and for all anyone knows sleeping with one eye open in his Geo Metro across the street, waiting for the first screams of distress to bring him charging to the rescue.

The other major tournaments, usually at colleges, provide no housing. In these instances four or five hundred high school students with their attendant coaches and chaperones and sherpas descend on whatever motels can be scrounged up in the area, much to the annual shock and dismay of the local moteliers. Many is the Holiday Inn that has seen no sleep the night 57 freshman boys away from home for the first time have discovered where the ice machine is located. "Unlock the door, you butt-head!" -- or words to that effect -- are the representative three a.m. cry of these particular wild animals.

As Jasmine remains unmoving by the doors, she becomes increasingly more anxious than her normal state of elevated suspense, which is never low to begin with. Jasmine is a worrier at best, and she's worried now about her little sister, Camelia. Jasmine is a junior, experienced, knowledgeable. Camelia is a freshman, participating today for the first time. Jasmine is more scared than Camelia.

Jasmine has already debated three rounds in the primary tournament of the weekend, the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial. There are two more rounds for her before the eliminations this afternoon. For Camelia and the other novices, there's what is known as The Little Johnson. This is a three-round tournament for novices only, run concurrently with the Memorial on the Memorial's second day. The Little Johnson is the classic debut event for Northeastern debaters. Camelia, along with Hamlet Buglaroni and the Tarleton twins, will be among those debutants.

"Any sign of them?" Mr. Jutmoll has come up beside Jasmine, and he too scans the arriving swarm outside the glass doors for the rest of his team.

"Not yet," she replies.

"They can't be much longer. There's T.L.," Mr. Jutmoll says.

A large school bus is waiting with blinking directional signal to turn into the driveway. The words "Toulouse Lautrec School District" printed tall on its side are readable from across the street.

"Where's everyone else?" the coach asks.

"In the cafeteria."

"I'm going to join them. You going to hold the fort?"

Jasmine nods.

"Good. Bring them in when they show up."

He walks off down the hall, his crabbed movements more gnomish than usual, as they tend to be after a bad night's sleep in a local EconoLodge, which is how coaches pass the evenings of overnight tournaments while their students are being housed. No town, no matter how small or remote, is without its EconoLodge.

Jasmine turns back and watches the students pouring out of the T.L. bus. There are fifteen or twenty of them, all in the dress-up debate uniform of the only clothes they own that they don't enjoy wearing: the ties, the suits, the blazers. Jasmine, in her black suit, has gotten so used to it that she's begun to enjoy it, and its somberness has come to reflect her personality.

"Jesus, Mateo and Felipe!"

She hears the frustrated words and knows without looking the identity of the speaker: Had Fleece, or "Had Fleece, All-American," as Jasmine's Nighten Day teammates call him behind his back. The captain of the T.L. debate team, he bursts past Jasmine out of the building and into the confused bevy of his novices. They are now in the process of unloading their evidence tubs, plastic containers the size of sheep coffins in which the two-person teams transport their research, and they are making a hash of it, spilling the contents of one as two girls try to load it atop two others on a dolly, while another pair have a tub caught in the bus's buzzing emergency door. Fleece, at six foot two with a linebacker's solidly muscular build, stands over his novices both in brawn and in maturity, and starts to put the fiasco to rights.

Jasmine sighs. At five foot one and ninety one pounds, she is about half his size, and they have never exchanged a word except for the time she got lost in his school and he pointed her toward the auditorium, and where he is golden and blonde and chiseled thickly from the WASPiest of blood stocks, she is tiny and dark and as Japanese as the Emperor... but that doesn't stop her from sighing again as Had Fleece points his now organized novices into the school in an orderly single file, following behind them like a disgruntled Patton, barely satisfied that his soldiers will survive the enemy's first volley.

Jasmine doesn't even notice that the little Nighten Day school bus has pulled into the driveway, and her sister and the others have finally made it to The Little Johnson.

Will Had Fleece take Camelia to the Senior Prom?

Is Buglaroni still on the bus, or did his teammates toss him out the window in Hoboken?

Did John Rawls ever not contradict himself?

What is Tarnish Jutmoll's deep dark secret?

The answer to one of these questions is revealed in our next episode -- "Measles: The Disease that isn't a Palindrome!"