



## Episode 20

### Road Trip!

There is a feeling that everyone shares at the start of a tournament. It is a sense of disruption. The normal activities of the week are suddenly aborted, ordinary schedules are tossed aside, and you're pulled away from family and schoolmates and colleagues as you enter a separate universe with its own unique activities and schedules and inhabitants. The disruption occurs because at no time is there any sharing of resources between your normal life and debate life, except that you personally happen to exist in both of them. Once a tournament routine is put into motion you quickly settle into it, but the wrenching from what is faintly construable as real life to the fantasy that is debate life is always a striking transition. And the transition is greatest when you're metaphorically traveling halfway around the world in the process.

Jasmine Maru is in the first stage of that disruptive transition. On an ordinary Friday she would awaken at exactly six thirty-three and be out the door at seven oh six, her sister at her side, the two of them just in time to meet their regular bus to Nighten Day High School. But this morning her alarm went off at four thirty-eight, one minute before her mother knocked on the bedroom door to see if she was awake yet, and she was in the car at five thirteen for her mother to drive her to the high school with one eye on the road, one hand on the steering wheel, and a dangerously sloshing traveling mug of coffee marking the boundary between mother and daughter in the armrest holder between them.

It is now five twenty-three, and Jasmine's mother mumbles something that sounds like either "Grud duck" or "Wood cluck" as Jasmine closes the car door behind her. The morning is remarkably warm for October, and Old Yeller, the decrepit Nighten Day school building, looks tired in the early sunlight. Jasmine walks up to the school bus as the car pulls off to head back home, and she carefully pushes her suitcase into the open luggage area in the belly of the vehicle. Hers is the first, but she is not surprised. She is usually the first to show up anywhere, having inherited what is apparently a genetic fear of being late from her meticulously punctual parents. Keeping her backpack, she walks up and enters the bus. The driver ignores her as she walks about three quarters of the way to the rear. An empty school bus adds to the sense of disconnection from her normal life: ordinarily she is never the first on and never the last off, while at debates she is always both.

She drops into a seat and digs into her backpack for her portable music player as she awaits her teammates.

The parade is swift as the appointed departure time of five thirty gets nearer. The first person she sees as the slam-bang opening chords of the Carmen overture burst through her headphones is Mr. Jutmoll, coming out of the school with his neat little carpetbag suitcase in one hand and his ancient black leather attaché case in the other. As he makes what looks like a painful descent down the front stairs, Griot Goldbaum's Jeep Grand Cherokee pulls into the parking lot. Griot is driving, and when the doors open it seems as if the entire Nighten Day Speech and Debate Team is falling out from all sides, but it is only David and William, the Duo Interp team, and Mark and Noah, the Extempers. Jasmine represses her natural revulsion at the energy-sucking nature of the Jeep as they all tussle at the back of the gas-guzzler, grabbing their bags, sorting out whose is which. Then they rustle toward the bus looking half-dressed and half-awake, which completely defines them.

The rest of the LD team arrives next, Ellie DiBella and Trat Warner pulling up in Ellie's smoke-belching Volkswagen diesel Rabbit. She seldom leaves the car in the parking lot overnight in the winter months, because the likelihood of it starting when it's cold is practically nil, but there's no problem on a warm weekend like this. She and Trat grab their bags, and for a second Jasmine can believe that they actually live together, since she hasn't seen them apart for over a year now, but she dimly recollects that they both have parents and normal lives somewhere on their resumes.

Because of the nature of the Miami Messerschmitt tournament -- strong varsity-level competition from across the country -- only Nighten Day's varsity squad makes the trip. The four freshmen LDers who debuted last week (well, three, considering Buglaroni's immediate ad hoc suspension) and the two sophomore LDers who had yet to start the year, would be sitting this one out, as would fifteen or so assorted younger speechies. Messerschmitt was a tournament you went to because you thought you could take tin, i.e. win a trophy. Having taken tin last week at the Johnson, Jasmine is ready to go for it again.

Mr. Jutmoll is now up front talking to the bus driver, making room for Ellie and Trat to pass him on their way down the aisle. Outside the bus, a Geo Metro the size of a medium raccoon pulls up and Kumar -- Nighten's Humorous Interpreter -- slides dully out of the passenger side, already wearing his suit but with a Phish T-shirt underneath it and a green fedora perched atop his head. Right behind it is a Ford Taurus, and exiting from this passenger door is Ashley Ambrose, Nighten's Original Interpreter. She too is dressed, but not haphazardly, like Kumar. Ashley is never haphazard, and never less than fully dressed in a pastel lawyer suit, a white silk shirt, a Hermes scarf tied tightly around her throat -- and never the same scarf twice -- and three inch heels in a color matching her suit.

Her eternal empty smile is pasted across her mouth, even at this early hour.

Jasmine glances at her watch. Five twenty-nine. As Kumar and Ashley find seats on the bus there is a motor roar outside that overrides the sound of the Bizet in Jasmine's ears, and a Porsche Boxster pulls up the driveway. With a flourish and a blown kiss to the driver, her father -- who else, Jasmine wonders, would blow a kiss to her father? -- the last member of the Messerschmitt travelers makes her appearance. As always, Cartier Diamond hasn't a hair out of place, and appears to have been dressed by the servants with great care in a chic black casual suit that Jasmine estimates cost more than all of Jasmine's wardrobe put together, if in fact the items in Jasmine's closet could be considered a wardrobe.

Cartier pulls two suitcases from the sports car -- for a one-night trip -- and walking tall and straight, her sunglasses perched on the top of her head, she heads for the bus. A minute later she is walking down the aisle, the queen of England arriving at the opening of Parliament.

Jasmine had never liked Cartier before last weekend. Now she has come to hate her, and wishes she would trip and land face down on the bus floor. But she knows it will not happen. Cartier has never tripped in her life, and she isn't going to start now.

"Head count!" Mr. Jutmoll calls from the front of the bus as Cartier slips into the seat across from Jasmine. Cartier smiles, her eyes half-closed as if she knows something Jasmine doesn't know but ought to. Which is probably the case.

Tarnish Jutmoll walks down the aisle of the bus, looking at his list and matching the names to the faces. He is meticulous about this, and Jasmine, having heard the rumors, thinks she understands why.

"We're all here," the coach says, folding the list and inserting it back into his wallet. He'll be checking it again often during the rest of the weekend.

There is a pregnant pause as Tarnish Jutmoll stands before his team. They are scattered in the rear of the bus, one to a seat, except for Ellie and Trat on one side and David and William on the other, who share their seats and sit upright facing forward rather than half-slouched facing the center aisle.

"I've got a few things to say before we leave," Jutmoll says.

They are used to Jutmoll's little inaugural speeches. They know he worries about them, and they all like and respect him, so they are willing to give him a bigger piece of their attention than they would most adults at five thirty on a Friday morning.

"We've got a big tournament ahead of us," Jutmoll begins. "We've got a long flight, but we'll be with everybody we know, so it should be fun. And we're all staying at the same hotel, so there should be no problems there."

"Is it the tournament hotel?" Ellie asks.

Jutmoll shakes his head. "There is no tournament hotel. Or more to the point, there's about thirty tournament hotels. All the action is at the college. And that's what I want to talk about. Once we get there, we'll be going off in all directions. I will be giving you schedules and timetables about where you are going to be and when and where I expect you to meet up with me and check in so I know where you are and what you're doing. As always, the rule of two is in effect after six."

The rule of two is a simple preventative that allows no one to roam around alone after dark on a college campus. Each team member must either be in the company of at least one other teammate, or a known student from another team, at all times, or face immediate suspension from the team. There are no exceptions to this rule, which has the vestigial childish odor in everyone's memory of summer camps and the buddy system. But whenever he discusses this, Mr. Jutmoll gains a sense of seriousness unlike any other time.

And again, Jasmine knows, it's all connected to those rumors...

"Between now and when we get started this afternoon, each one of you will have ample time to work with me one last time on your pieces or your cases," Jutmoll continues. He turns to Jasmine. He knows that she will be the least likely to complain about the early hour. "I'll start with you as soon as we get on the highway?" he asks.

She nods. "Okay."

"You wouldn't want to take the headphones off when I'm talking to you, would you?"

He says it with a smile, and she smiles back, lifting the music player in her lap. "Already off," she replies.

"Aren't we all?" Griot throws out from the other side of the bus.

"All right," Jutmoll says. "That's about it. Any questions?"

There are shakes of heads all around.

"Then let's get down to Miami and take some tin," he says, turning and walking back up to the front of the bus. He says something to the driver and a moment later they are on

their way.

Jasmine switches her music player back on and glances at her watch again. Five thirty-five. They almost always leave on time for a tournament, no matter at what ungodly hour that might be.

And by the time the bus makes a right turn out of the school driveway, the sense of disruption from regular life to tournament life has disappeared. Tournament life is now in full swing. The team is assembled, everyone is in their seats eating or listening to music or already trying to get back to sleep, as they do at every tournament, and they are on their way.

It is as if regular life no longer existed.

And for the next couple of days, it won't.

**What are the rumors surrounding Tarnish Jutmoll?**

**Why are David and William sharing a seat?**

**Are all of these speechies going to be total stereotypes?**

**Would they prefer to be called Speecho-Americans?**

**Are there any stars on the horizon to rival the fame of Bruce Willis, who is now older than your grandmother?**

**You can ask, but you probably can't get an answer in our next installment: "Clone in a Can: Will it ever replace Cheerios in the hearts of American mine workers?"**