



Episode 3

Things to do in Denver when you're just feeling a little sickly

Tarnish Jutmoll is making his first circuit of the morning. Before the day is out, he will have made this trip twenty or thirty times.

Jutmoll is a small man, barely five feet tall, with a white goatee below a wild range of similarly white hair on his little skull. One long white eyebrow stretches the entire ridge above his dark, probing eyes. He inevitably seems to have just come indoors from a windstorm, and one might mistake him for a tiny wizard or a large elf if one is partial to fantasy universes. His main anchor to reality is his bow-leggedness, his knees seemingly far enough apart to allow the passage between them of a pair of Siamese twin toddlers clutching black market Tickle Me Elmo dolls. One imagines that it hurts him to take even the tiniest step, and that appearance is not deceiving. Ever since the accident...

But Jutmoll doesn't think about the accident. He can't. And he won't.

The first stop on his circuit this morning is the tournament's judges' lounge. At every tournament, a room is set aside where the judges can congregate away from the hoi and the polloi of the debaters. The judges are a varied lot: some of them are coaches, some of them are college students who are former high school debaters themselves, many of them are parents hoodwinked into coming by their fast-talking children. In the lounge they read or sleep or gossip, punctuated by drinking coffee and eating junk food supplied by the host school's parents. Some schools on the circuit are legendary for their Lucullan banquets mixing the finest delicacies of land and sea and air, expertly prepared and served at the peak of parental perfection to the thankful throngs of the hard-working judges. Other schools content themselves with irregular runs to Dunkin Donuts or the opening of an occasional bag of taco chips and a jar of A&P house-brand salsa. On the debate circuit, hospitality is a variable commodity.

The judges' lounge at Andrew Johnson is a tiny alcove off the main cafeteria, barely worthy of the name room, much less lounge. Presumably this is where the teachers eat

during regular school hours. There are three tables and a dozen or so hard chairs comprising the entire setup. When Jutmoll enters, a handful of college students are sitting at one of the tables, laughing and talking and drinking coffee. He doesn't recognize any of them, which is unusual. At another table, a tray of bagels and plastic containers of flavored cream cheeses -- this morning's graciousness -- are spread out next to a giant coffee urn. At the last table sits one lone, bedraggled parent staring blankly at the cup of coffee in front of him. Jutmoll nods at the parent, whose face is moderately familiar but with no name attached, and crabs his way to the coffee urn, where he pours himself his fourth cup of the day. This level of consumption would stunt his growth, if he were expecting any. Fortunately he stopped growing fifty years ago.

"Good morning, Tarnish."

The voice is broad and beaming and unmistakable.

"Good morning, Seth," Jutmoll says, turning around.

Seth B. Obomash towers over Tarnish Jutmoll. Obomash is easily six and a half feet tall, and Jutmoll wouldn't even venture a guess how much he weighs, but it is safe to say that the trip around him is equally long in any direction. Obomash's skin is nearly as dark as the coffee in Jutmoll's plastic cup, making him nearly a black opposite of the littler man's milky pallor.

"Have a good night?" Obomash asks as he moves to the coffee urn. He's already got three sugared donuts clenched in his gargantuan left hand -- the traditional light Obomashian breakfast.

"As well as can be expected," Jutmoll replies.

"At the EconoLodge?"

Jutmoll nods. "You too?"

Obomash shakes his head and smiles enigmatically. "I've got other places to stay." He blows on his coffee and takes a tentative sip. "Usually do," he adds with a salacious wink and a bite of donut that leaves a dusting of confectioner's sugar on his lips.

Jutmoll, not quite sure of his meaning, simply nods and walks out of the judges' lounge. Obomash, a history teacher who is the debate coach at Veil of Ignorance Catholic High School, is the Grand High Pooh-Bah of Jutmoll's region's division of the National Forensic League. In the three years since his taking on this responsibility, Jutmoll has convinced himself that Obomash has mistakenly ventured into the wrong NFL, and that no one has had the courage to point this out to him for fear of being punted over the nearest goal

post. Which pusillanimity includes Jutmoll as well.

Oh, well. There is room in forensics for everyone, Jutmoll consoles himself.

Jutmoll propels his bow legs in their shuffling gait to the room next door to the judges' lounge, the main cafeteria. He stands for a minute observing through the open doorway. This is the staging area for the participants in the tournament, nearly two hundred strong for this particular event. They are still pouring in from their night's housing, and the early hour keeps them from attaining their usual high decibel level. During the day they will always return here from their rounds, to complain about their opponents and their judges, to listen to their eternal portable music machines, to play games and gossip and even once in a while to attempt some homework. A few of the more energetic ones might slip outside to toss a Frisbee, while a few similarly energetic but less politic will toss a similar Frisbee without bothering to leave the building, until sooner or later they bean one of the coaches.

His eye quickly catches his own team's table; at tournaments every team quickly establishes its own turf and holds it closely for the duration. Often there are more teenage bottoms than chairs to hold them, and raids and set-tos are not an unfamiliar sight. Over the space of two days the tables slowly encrust with the residue of meals and snacks and mayhem, and few if any are the students who even notice it, much less think to toss it away. At the Nighten Day table, the three varsity members of Jutmoll's Lincoln-Douglas team other than Jasmine are looking in their case folders, going over their presentations. (There are two kinds of debate: Policy debate -- those people with the sheep-sized tubs -- pits two-person teams against each other, arguing a proposition of US policy. Lincoln-Douglas debaters go at it mano a mano, arguing resolutions that are usually of a philosophic nature. The difference between the two is dramatic, and the expressed politics between their supporters can be hellish. Nighten Day, a rather small school in the general scheme of these things, has only LD debaters, plus a contingent of Speech participants. Perhaps the only thing Policy and LD supporters agree on is that they resemble each other more than they resemble speechies. There are no Speech events at the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial -- usually only colleges host tournaments large enough to support the entire panoply of forensics -- so none of Nighten Day's speechies are here today. Which to Tarnish Jutmoll simply means that there are fewer thorns in his side today than some other days, but he is in no way thorn-free.)

"Excuse me, but you look like you actually know something."

The woman plants herself squarely in front of Jutmoll.

"I do know something," he replies. He nods and attempts to take a step away from her.

"I need to know where to sign up my team," she demands.

"I even know that," he says. He has already identified the woman as the worst of all possible debate adults: a parent on a mission. "What school are you from?" he asks her.

"Bisonette Technical. I'm Mrs. Nutmilk." When this brings no recognition she adds, "Amnea Nutmilk. Chesney's mother. Chesney Nutmilk." Her voice underlines those last two words.

Chesney Nutmilk. Jutmoll certainly knows him. He was a top Junior last year, but disappeared out of sight over the summer, the rumor being that he had moved to a school with no debate team. The mystery is now solved, the answer being Bisonette Technical. Obviously Mother Nutmilk has taken matters into her own hands, and taking matters into her own hands appears to be something at which she excels. She is not tall but she is solid, and her voice sounds as if it would slice cheese at twenty paces. Her hair is her most remarkable feature, thick and tangled like the gnarled roots of an old maple, sticking out from the sides of her head in a Pippi Longstocking approach but without the braids, and there is something about it that suggests to Jutmoll that once upon a time it might even have been attractive in a perverse sort of way, but now it's fifteen or twenty years past its prime. In fact, everything about Amnea Nutmilk says to Tarnish Jutmoll that in a perverse sort of way, it's fifteen or twenty years past its prime.

At thirty years past his own prime, Jutmoll finds that rather intriguing. Too bad the packaging belies the contents, he thinks.

"Registration is upstairs in front of the library." He points up at the ceiling. "Right above us now. You'll find it easily enough."

Without a thank you she spins around and marches out of the cafeteria. As she exits the door she snaps her fingers, and Jutmoll gets a sudden glimpse of poor Chesney Nutmilk, who apparently was talking to some friends outside the cafeteria. He's now been summoned, and answer that summons he shall, at the risk of life and limb. Chesney Nutmilk has definitely become Poor Chesney Nutmilk. Definitely and officially.

Jutmoll shakes his head and walks over to his team's table. "Good morning, Mr. Jutmoll," his students greet him, almost in unison.

"Good morning," he says, sitting down with his coffee. "The novices should be here soon. Toulouse Lautrec just arrived."

They all mumble something and return to their notebooks. Pre-round jitters. They're not really working on their cases so much as pushing themselves into the competitive zone, putting out of their minds the miserable night's sleep they've just fought through, the bad ziti dinner the night before, the half-eaten bagel this morning. They've got to enter a

different universe now, and they're using this time to phase into it. And that's the way it should be.

Jutmoll has his eye on the door, and now he sees Jasmine walking in with her sister in tow, followed by the two Tarleton twins, whom he has dubbed in his mind the Future Industrialists of America. Frick and Frank Tarleton. The two boys look so much alike in their identical gray suits that Jutmoll hasn't a hint of how to distinguish between them. So far he hasn't tried. Certainly some day they'll be able to buy and sell him. Maybe they already can.

Behind them come the imitable Buglaroni, his shirt tail already half on the ascendant, his pants far enough away from his shoes to require a treaty if they're ever going to get together, his red baseball cap cutting off circulation to his brain, forcing it to send all the wrong messages to his hormone centers. Every class, every year, has a Buglaroni, but not usually as Buglaroni-ish as this one. Even across the room his tie blares out, pink and white and -- no, it's somebody's picture. Star Trek. Captain Somebody Star Trek.

Tarnish Jutmoll sighs.

"L-D schematics!" a voice calls from across the room.

The reaction is instantaneous. Ninety-two varsity L-Ders jump out of their chairs and go running in the direction of the caller. The schematics are the listing of who's debating whom in the next round, just released from the tabulators of the tournament.

"Is that us?" Buglaroni asks.

"Not yet," Jutmoll answers distractedly.

"When are we up?"

"Not for a little while yet. I'll let you know."

"I didn't have much time to work on my cases," Buglaroni admits.

Tarnish Jutmoll is not surprised. "But you do have cases of some sort, don't you?"

Buglaroni nods. "Want to hear them? I pretty much had to do them on the bus."

Camelia Maru is sitting on the other side of the table, staring into her lap. Jutmoll has decided that she must be one of the shyest people he has ever seen. No wonder her sister is so protective of her. Frick and Frank Tarleton are still standing with baffled expressions on their faces, watching the horde across the room digging into the schematics.

"Wait till the varsity leaves, then you can read them to me," Jutmoll tells Buglaroni.

As the Nighten Day varsity debaters return, three of them grab their bags and head off. Only Jasmine remains. LD rounds are broken down into two flights, which is another way of saying the rounds are doubled up so that they can use the same judge twice in a row. Jasmine is in the second flight. She takes the chair between her sister and Buglaroni.

The last of the debaters heading off for the first flight are disappearing out the doorway when Tarnish Jutmoll sees someone totally unexpected entering the room. Make that two totally unexpected people entering the room.

"Hmmpf," he hmmpfs, sitting back in his chair and staring up at them as they approach. Jasmine notices the change in his posture and she turns around to see what's happening. Her little gasp is as surprised as his little hmmpf.

"Good morning, everybody," Cartier Diamond says. And then she smiles.

"What are you doing here?" Jutmoll asks.

"I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd drop in." She looks over at the Tarleton twins. "Hi, Frick. Hi, Frank."

They stare back at her without responding. Jutmoll is not surprised that their tongues are not up to the task of addressing Cartier Diamond this early in the morning. They are probably shocked that she even knows their names, although that doesn't surprise Jutmoll. He imagines that there isn't a male between nine and thirty-three that Cartier can't identify from a single hair follicle.

She is dressed in black, as she usually is: black shirt, black blazer, black pants, black boots. Actually classy in a way, he has to admit that. Her blond hair is shoulder length, and she is wearing sunglasses. She is tall enough and pretty enough to be a model, and Jutmoll often gets the impression that she is only pretending to be a high school student to bring back notes from the field. She is a senior, and she is on his speech team. And she has no reason to be here today, except to make trouble. As proof of that, her escort, who has yet to say a word and who is standing behind her -- as he usually does -- is none other than Mordred Prentice, a sophomore who has been following Cartier around probably since birth. Her familiar, as Jutmoll has come to think of him, he is chubby and short and unattractive, similarly dressed in black from head to foot, with only his red face to provide any color.

"Would you get me a cup of coffee like a good love, please?" Cartier asks Mordred as she slinks down into a chair.

He is off like a shot toward the breakfast table in the center of the cafeteria.

"Three Sweet and Lows," she calls out to his retreating back.

"Three Sweet and Lows," he echoes in a dry cackle.

"And so," Cartier asks, turning to Jutmoll, "when do the games begin?"

Will Mordred Prentice bring back the right number of Sweet and Lows?

Will Seth B. Obomash go back for more doughnuts?

Will Chesney Milknut admit that Amnea is his mother?

Will Buglaroni turn out to have the best cases Tarnish Jutmoll has ever heard?

Will 8-track tapes replace LPs?

As usual, the answers will be hard to come by in our next episode -- "A Fistful of Gherkins"