



Episode 40

Any Place I Hang My Hat is Holy

In the Speech & Debate world, there is one object that is valued higher than any other.

It is not merely valued, it is revered -- it inspires awe, in the classic sense of the word, where awe includes terror at the inherent power of the awe-ful object, where the object transcends good and evil by including both at their polar opposition, where the power of the object is infinite, all-representing, virtually deified.

In the Speech & Debate world, one object, above all others, inspires, nay, DEMANDS, this awe.

One object, comprising lowly materials and crafted through second-rate artisanship.

One object, replicated from school to school, from room to room.

One object, that the very thought of it, if that thought be even the slightest bit askew, can bar you from a tournament for life, be you a student, a parent, a coach, or even an archbishop.

One object, its name repeated at the beginning of every high school tournament as part of the litany of the debate godheads.

One object, magical, supreme, omnipresent.

One awe-ful, awful object.

One object....

The teacher's desk.

Business people have their offices, or at least cubicles. Scientists have their laboratories. Lawyers have their views of Wall Street from the 97th floor executive washrooms. Mongolians have their yurts. Truck drivers have the cabs of their semis. Trichina worms have raw pork. Even Snoopy has his doghouse.

But high school teachers have nothing. No office, no sanctuary, no private space to call their own. Or at least not usually; perhaps there are some schools where everyone has an office or two and be-gloved servants deliver tea on the hour and everything is very very lah-di-dah, but not in the real world where the middle class rules and the kids are just regular kids, smart and dumb in the statistically predictable combination, and the teachers are underpaid and underappreciated and if you think being a teacher is bad enough, imagine being a teacher who also coaches a debate team and travels every weekend with those same kids whose families underpay and underappreciate you. Imagine on top of that that your school is about to drop debate from its budget, removing the one unique thing by which you identified yourself, that had brought you self-esteem and the respect of your colleagues.

Imagine that, and you can understand the situation of Tarnish Jutmoll, as he sits behind the sacred object of his own teacher's desk at Nighten Day High School, getting up the nerve to make a telephone call in aid of obtaining a new job, a new job he doesn't even want.

Imagine that, and you can understand that Tarnish Jutmoll is not a happy man.

His desk, as desks go, is not cluttered. He still has his notes from the afternoon's team meeting, and some blue books from an essay test he has to grade before the day is over. He has no family, so there are no photographs of wife or children. There is a small silver bowl, an old trophy from a tournament he'd rather forget, but he knows that he shouldn't, and he keeps this trinket so that he never will. And aside from assorted pens and pencils, that is it. It is not much. Not that many teachers' desks are much, but it isn't their collections that give them their sacred value, it is the fact that, for most teachers, it is all they have.

Jutmoll rolls back his chair and stands up. His teacher's desk, like most, has no phone. Which means that he will have to call from the teachers' lounge, another insult against privacy. But no one else will be there, not at this time of day. The last team practice has ended, the last late bus has left, and aside from his own and the custodians', the last cars have left the parking lot.

He walks down the empty hall, one shoe slapping the floor alternately with the other one shuffling across it. After sitting for a long time, the chronic pain in his back and hips is always a little worse, and walking is that much more difficult. At times like these, he wonders while he still bothers. He could retire. He would live pretty well. There would be the pension, the money saved after all these years.

But he would miss it. School, a little. Debate, a lot. He misses debate already, and it hasn't even ended yet. The job at Veil of Ignorance may be his last chance to end his career as a happy man.

It is that bad. If debate is a disease that students contract, fighting its symptoms for four years, at least they recover their health after graduation, or at worst have another four year bout at college, but still with a prognosis for a debate-free life thereafter. But a coach gets debate in the blood so bad that it can never be removed. It replaces the red and white corpuscles with aff and neg corpuscles and becomes an addiction worse than heroin. At least heroin has methadone and cold turkey. For debate coaches there is no withdrawal, only judging.

For hire.

JV rounds.

Aaarrgh!

Jutmoll eases himself down into the couch. The phone is beside him, on a small table. He lifts it and, and punches in the number he has memorized--

And stops one number short of the whole.

And takes a deep breath.

And tries again.

"Veil of Ignorance." It's a female voice.

"Monsignor Lloyd, please."

"Please hold."

There is a click, and Jutmoll is on hold, listening to recorded music. Carmina Burana.

"Hello."

"Monsignor Lloyd?"

"Yes."

"This is Tarnish Jutmoll. From Nighten Day High School."

"Yes, Mr. Jutmoll. What can I do for you?"

Jutmoll swallows. "It's about Seth Obomash," he says.

The monsignor's sigh is audible over the line. "Go on."

"I understand that he's been suspended?"

"Yes."

"I would like to apply for his job."

"Oh." The monsignor's tone changes. "I'm sorry. I've spent all day talking to parents and the press and who knows who-all, and I've been very defensive about it. You understand."

"Of course."

"All right." He pauses. "Mr. Obomash's job."

"I'm a social studies teacher myself, so I could easily take over his curriculum. I'm not a Catholic--"

"Most of our teachers are not Catholic, Mr. Jutmoll. Unless you include the priests, that is." He chuckles.

"I know. I just wanted to say that. And that I've been a debate coach here for--"

"I have to interrupt you, Mr. Jutmoll."

"No, please don't. I've been working here at Nighten Day almost my entire life, and it's very difficult for me to even think about getting a new job, even one I'm qualified for. But we're probably eliminating our debate team this year and--"

"Mr. Jutmoll. Please!"

Jutmoll stops talking. He knows that he's been on the borderline of hysteria. Having aff and neg corpuscles will do that to you.

"I do know who you are, Mr. Jutmoll, and I know you are eminently qualified for Mr. Obomash's position. But I'm afraid replacing Mr. Obomash is a moot subject."

"You're not going to replace him?" Jutmoll asks.

"Actually, I already have replaced him."

"Already?" Jutmoll is startled. "Already? He's only been suspended for one day!"

"I had an excellent candidate for the position, and I took advantage of that candidate's availability. I'm sorry."

"You couldn't have decided that quickly." Jutmoll is now pleading. "I can't imagine anyone as qualified for the position as I am. I have the teaching experience and the debate experience."

"I grant you that, Mr. Jutmoll. But I'm afraid the offer has already been made. The position is filled."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes. Well, it's not your fault."

"These things just happen."

"These things just happen."

"Now that I know you'd be interested in a position at Veil, I'll definitely keep you in mind if something else opens up."

"Yes. Well, thank you. I appreciate that."

"Thanks for calling, Mr. Jutmoll."

"Thank you, Monsignor."

The line goes dead, and Jutmoll hangs up the phone.

The position is filled. Already. How could that be?

He stares blankly at the wall across the room, at the bulletin board listing the various benefits of the teachers' union, from group travel deals to cheap credit cards. What the board doesn't list is the benefit of outlasting your usefulness.

With a heave, Jutmoll lifts himself up from the couch. There are still those papers to grade, and he might as well do it before he goes home.

With his painful walk, he heads back toward his classroom. To his teacher's desk, the sacred, awful object that signifies the extent of his existence.

The teacher's desk. It is all he has left.

May it rot in hell.

Did someone really get the job at Veil of Ignorance?

Does the Catholic Church recognize the holiness of random furniture?

Does global warming explain why George W. Bush is melting?

Didn't I see in the supermarket that Saddam was still alive?

Hints and mints will be only marginally available in our next episode: "Gangrene: Fans of Graham?"