



Episode 6

Bless Me, Father, for I have Tabbed

Tarnish Jutmoll sits staring out the second floor window. Some kids are chasing a Frisbee on the lawn below with somewhat surprising aggression. None of them are from Nighten Day School.

"You look tired, Tarnish," Seth B. Obomash says. He is sitting across the table from Jutmoll, breaking a prune danish into bite-sized pieces and stuffing them into his mouth one by one with automatic precision. No wonder he is half the size of Cleveland.

"I feel tired," Jutmoll responds.

"You need more life in your life," Obomash says. "You've got to get back to that state of nature I hear so much about."

"I'll leave that to you, Seth."

They are sitting in the tournament's sanctum sanctorum, the tab room. This is where the results from the ballots are entered into the computers which, occasionally, do not crash. The tab room is run by a handful of Tab Masters, coaches who travel like itinerant wizards from tournament to tournament, plying their skills with the arcane software that makes the whole operation possible. In return for their services, they receive occasional pats on the back and the revilement of all the debaters who blame them, and not the true culprits (namely, sun spots) that throw a tournament off schedule. Only coaches of an equivalent high power, such as Jutmoll and Obomash, are allowed to rub elbows with this sacred order.

The high priest at the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial, who is also running the tabbing for the Little Johnson, is Dan Ryan, the coach of Toulouse Lautrec. Ryan is an

explosive little Irishman who spends entire tournaments sitting in front of his Macintosh Powerbook (he carries a spare, just in case), clicking the keys and muttering to himself in an almost musical collection of unintelligible syllables. His aides, because no one person can pull off the necessary legerdemain of tabbing, especially when the results start coming in from four or five divisions at once, are Alida Devans, Haj L. Sworn, and Renate Screeds. All three are also coaches who have been at it as long as anyone can remember.

Except for Tarnish Jutmoll, who's been at it longer than anybody. Ever. Or so it feels.

"Your kids are doing well, Tarnish," Obomash says. "Jasmine is four and oh."

"She's a good debater," Tarnish says.

"She's tough. Almost too tough. She's a little scary, sometimes."

"I've got scarier kids on my team than that," Jutmoll says. "Much scarier."

There is a steady procession of students entering the tab room with ballots and handing them to Dan Ryan. Ryan screws up his face into a reddish knot as he scans each ballot for accuracy. If it passes that scan he grunts and hands it either to Alida Devans or Renate Screeds, depending on which division it's for. If it's for the Memorial, Alida then reads the information back to Ryan, who enters it on his computer. If it's for the Little Johnson, Renata reads it to Haj Sworn. After each round they switch positions of reader and inputter.

"Two LD ballots left," Ryan announces to the room. There are a few nods and grunts of acknowledgment.

The tab room is a sanctum sanctorum because no one except the blest or the holy who are already members of the Mystical Society of the Tabula are allowed to enter. No debater would think of intruding on Tab's cabalist activities, while mortals higher on the forensic food chain like parents or minor coaches occasionally attempt a trespass but never get past the line of home-team debaters who usually bar the entrance (and who, by the way, earn territorial exemption from the no-debaters rule, and spend their time basking in the acolyte's reflected glory as they run ballots from their table that serves as moat into the hands of the High Priest). Tarnish Jutmoll, who has tabbed more tournaments than even the Dan Ryan himself, belongs here more than anyone. Aside from him and Obomash and the actual tabbers, there are also three other long-time coaches scattered around the room, each one reading the morning newspaper.

"Ballots!" a girl announces loudly, rushing into the room. She is one of Andrew Johnson's freshmen, and is still full of the excitement of the moment.

Ryan extends a freckled hand and takes them from her, scans them with his screwed-up face, then hands them to Alida Devans. Alida, who at six feet tall is, in Jutmoll's estimation, the most formidable coach on the circuit aside from Obomash, reads the results in a clear steady voice, and Dan Ryan inputs the numbers.

"That's it," he announces when she's finished. "All the LD ballots are in."

Everyone in the room turns in Ryan's direction. There is a sense of palpable anxiety in the room, as thick as frogs in a lily pond.

It is time for the ceremony.

"Oh son of Cronus," Ryan intones. "Look down with favor from Mount Olympus." His right index finger rises in the air, and then his hand slowly falls upon the computer's mouse. "I click," he chants.

"He clicks," every voice in the room repeats softly.

"I select the criteria," he chants. Click. Click. Click.

"He selects the criteria," every voice in the room repeats a little less softly.

"Pairing high-low within brackets." His voice is rising.

"Pairing high-low within brackets." So too are the other voices rising.

"Waiting!" The word is a yell.

The room begins to repeat it with growing crescendo. "Waiting. Waiting. WAITING. **WAITING.**"

The Macintosh computer crunches its way to its inevitable results.

"Ahh!" Ryan breathes.

All are silent.

"All room used only once. All judges used twice. The tab is a tentative success." Ryan is pleased, but it is not over yet. "I print the schematic for the tab room," he announces. Again the index finger raised before slowly descending on the mouse. The click, click, click.

"Owa katta meena!" Renate Screeds cries.

"Owa, owa, owa katta meena," the room responds. "Owa, owa, owa katta meena. Owa, owa, owa katta meena."

"Katta katta katta!"

"Katta katta katta!"

"Tabula tabula tomb-bah. Tabula tabula rasa."

"Rasa. Rasa. Rasa. Rasa."

Even Jutmoll is now caught up in the excitement. The laser printer has begun to chug its own mantra.

Haj L. Sworn rises from his chair, the excitement proving too great for him. "Kali ballah beeli buhm!" he shouts. "Ballah beeli buhm!"

"Kali ballah beeli buhm! Kali buhm! Kali buhm!"

"Kali Kali Kali Kali ballah buhm ballah buhm!"

"Kali Kali Kali Kali ballah buhm ballah buhm!"

"Buhm bumh buhm buhm."

"Buhm bumh buhm buhm."

The voices descend into a steady chorus of soft buhm-bumh-buhms as the page finishes its path through the printer. Dan Ryan grabs it hungrily and pores over it, his face once again twisted into that Irish red knot. His verdict is not long in forthcoming.

"Two judges are judging twice in the same flight," he says.

The reaction in the room is swift, like the air escaping a popped balloon. Expectations return from the Olympian to basic Greek. Tabbing once again has attempted to scale the heights of perfection, only to be shot down by the reality of poor computer programming. Ryan is already back at the keyboard, patching in manual solutions to the problems.

"I thought we'd get it that time," Obomash says.

"You never know," Jutmoll sympathizes. "You just never know."

He looks out the window again. Cartier Diamond is leaning against her car, smoking a cigarette. Mordred Prentice is beside her, apparently standing guard against any possible authority figures arriving unexpectedly. The accepted practice is that smoking is not allowed within a thirty-six mile radius of any school building, and the punishment ranges anywhere from gouged eyeballs to instant death. In this day and age it amazes Jutmoll that any teenager would take up smoking, but the lures of pseudo-adulthood are not diminished by surgeon general's warnings. But a smart girl like Cartier... A too-smart girl like Cartier.

He looks away from the window. Maybe she'll quit school and run off with one of her married boyfriends. She had already cinched the annual senior year award for the girl most likely to appear on the front pages of the supermarket tabloids. What more was left for her?

"Let's try it again," Ryan announces.

But this time the thrill is gone. Anyone with a little experience can fix a broken tabulation. But it takes the Wagnerian purity of a Parsifal to pull one first time out of the computer. But that first time moment is inexorably lost, at least for this round.

And sure enough, the second schematic comes up as clean as a Muppet's armpit.

"Ready to copy!" Dan Ryan announces. "Runner," he calls out.

An Andrew Johnson freshman appears at his side as if by magic.

"Two hundred copies," Ryan tells the boy in his Stone Temple Pilots tee shirt and backwards Yankee cap. "Then bring them to the cafeteria and get out of the way."

"Yes, sir," the freshman replies, and he disappears as quickly as he materialized, going off in the direction of the copier room.

"Ballots!" the freshman girl returns with yet another set. For there are other divisions still to enter, and further chances yet to pull the perfect tabulation.

It is all in the hands of the son of Cronus.

Will Dan Ryan pull off a perfect tab for the varsity policy division?

Will Cartier Diamond marry Joe Camel?

Will Seth B. Obomash run out of prune danishes?

**What do the Danes call danishes, anyhow? What does Clair Danes call danishes?
What do the Danes call Clair Danes?**

Is it soup yet?

**Why would anyone look for the answers to these questions in our next
installment: "I'm Carrying Elvis' Baby And I'd Like to Put it Down for Few
Minutes to Rest My Arms"?**