



Episode 63

It's Not the Black Spot, but it'll Probably Do the Job

It is the sort of thing for which you choose your time and your place carefully. Camelia Maru has chosen the lockers, immediately following the after-school debate meeting. What is harder to decide is what to say. You wish to effectively make your point, which means straddling the dangerously thin line between too much and too little. But Camelia has an innate ability to use words, demonstrated by her starting success as an LDer. And she thinks she has come to the right conclusion about what to say when the time comes.

And the time is coming now.

The meeting is attended by all the debate regulars. Griot, Jasmine, Ellie and Trat will be debating at the Vaganza, so most of the discussion is about the new topic. The novices will drop by at some point or other over the weekend to observe, most likely on Sunday during the break rounds. Today they mostly sit quietly during the meeting, Camelia included, soaking in the discussion, letting their varsity work out their ideas against one another. As usual, Mr. Jutmoll directs the discussion without interpolating too much of his own opinions, but he will meet again with the varsity tomorrow after going tonight to watch the Round Robin, bringing back the wisdom of the Robinskis.

And then the meeting is over. There is about five minutes before the late buses take off.

"Buglaroni!"

He is walking alone away from the classroom. He has his jacket on, his backpack slung over one shoulder.

"Hi, Cam," he says.

Cam. She hates that nickname. Buglaroni has chosen to ignore this fact since kindergarten.

"I need to talk to you," she says to him.

The other students are going off in their own direction.

"You want a ride home with us?" Jasmine asks her sister. She is walking next to Griot, who is a senior with his own car.

"Can you wait five minutes?" Camelia asks.

Griot nods. He appears almost happy at the prospect.

"I wouldn't mind a ride--"

Camelia pushes Buglaroni off toward the lockers before he can finish his sentence.

"You can walk," she tells him firmly.

"What's the matter?" he asks. "Where are we going?"

"To the lockers. Over there."

"I want a ride home too. Griot will give me a ride, won't he?"

They are now alone at the edge of the locker area. Camelia, eight inches shorter and fifty pounds lighter, gives Buglaroni a shove. Taken by surprise, he stumbles backwards against the hollow metal of the lockers, nearly falling.

"What's that all about?" he whines.

Camelia has to look up at him, but that is no detriment to her ability to make him feel small. Her dark eyes belie her soft features. From Buglaroni's perspective she is backlit, and he can see little of her except those flashing eyes in the softly shimmering oval of her ebony hair. The effect is visually of a halo, but spiritually, it feels to Buglaroni more like satanic horns.

"*I know*," she hisses at him.

"What?"

"I know," she repeats. "I know about Jasmine's cases. I know why you won on Saturday. I know all about you, Buglaroni."

He stares back at her, speechless.

"Don't even think of trying to deny it," she tells him.

She reaches into her own backpack and pulls out the stolen cases. Stolen first from Jasmine, and then from Buglaroni.

"What did you think when you couldn't find these?" she asks, tossing them at his feet. "Or did you think at all?"

He remains silent, staring down at the scattered pages on the locker floor.

"Look at me!" she demands of him.

He looks up from the floor into her flashing eyes.

"This is it, Buglaroni," she says. "I own you now. Do you understand that? I own you!"

Buglaroni cannot pull his own eyes away from her burning stare.

I own you!

The debater's curse.

And for Buglaroni, there is no escape. And it goes way beyond debate. Camelia Maru stands there for another minute, then without warning turns on her heels and stomps off down the hallway. Buglaroni remains in the locker area.

I own you!

The words echo through his mind. His heritage includes its own curses, versions of the evil eye that hearken back to the first Australopithecines trying to gain a psychological advantage over their buddies in the rift.

I own you!

It is completely unspecific, yet he understands completely what it means, that Camelia has an indisputable advantage she can use against him at any time, any place. He must fear her, because he fears her use of this information. If he hadn't begun enjoying debate, if he hadn't enjoyed the actual winning, it might not matter to him so much. But he did like winning. He liked it a lot. After all, he had broken one of the great unwritten laws to do so. He had stolen someone else's cases. Could there be any graver debate sin?

I own you!

There are, in fact, different kinds of ownership. Aside from the ownership of a Buglaroni by a Maru, which we will allow to play itself out in its own time, there is also a specific form of ownership that applies to debate, and that is the ownership of one debater by another through the agency of debate itself.

I own you!

In the ordinary run of competition, in whatever area you reside, you tend to hit the same people over and over again. There is a curiosity value in the fact that you can live in the next town from someone and never hit them, and that happens often to everybody, but as a general rule, the mathematics prove themselves out, and you do run into the same people again and again. Much of the time, the results of these rounds are unpredictable. Sometimes one debater wins, sometimes the other. Sometimes one debater is so much stronger than the other that even though they hit often, and the same debater wins again and again, neither of the debaters gives it much thought. Of course debater A always beats debater B. What's the big deal about it?

But at times, two debaters are ranked fairly close, and they meet each other for the first time. Debater A wins. That is happenstance. They meet again. Debater A wins again. That is coincidence. They meet again. Debater A wins again. That is enemy action. They meet yet again. Debater A wins yet again. And again. And again.

That is something else altogether. That is ownership.

"I own you," Debater A can say.

And Debater A is right. What started as a reasonable competition becomes a psychological battle, with Debater A holding all the artillery. If every time Debater A walks into the room Debater B loses, Debater B begins doubting his or her own abilities whenever he is in Debater A's presence. Debater B starts to dread the sighting of Debater A, even across a crowded room.

It is never some enchanted evening when someone owns you.

But meanwhile, we have left Hamlet P. Buglaroni standing in fear and trembling in his locker area. And his unenchanted evening is haunted by his ownership by Camelia Maru.

Suddenly he remembers the time. He looks at his watch, and realizes that although it feels like hours have passed, he has only been standing here for a few seconds. He still has time to make the late bus.

He runs down the empty corridor, hoping he will get there in time.

Someday My Prince Will Come

Tara Petskin has too much homework for a senior.

Most graduating students at Veil of Ignorance manage to cut themselves a little slack in their final semesters. Their admittance into college will depend on their past record more than this year, so instead of packing their last year with one crusher after the other, they throw in a gut course or two or three. Maybe Cinema Appreciation. Or Contemporary Music Theory. Or Introduction to Fantasy Novels. Or even, at Veil, Advanced Religion.

Tara has always wondered about the concept of advanced religion. What, at a Catholic school, constitutes unadvanced religion? It makes you wonder.

Tara, however, has not taken the easy senior route. In addition to two fourth-year classes, she is taking three advanced placement courses, including two sciences and history, although she has skipped A.P.History two days running now, in silent protest of Lisa Torte taking over the class from Seth B. Obomash. But Tara is realistic. She knows that she must return within the next few days if she wishes to stay with the course.

She is sitting now in her bedroom, staring into the large monitor screen of her computer. But she is not concentrating on the research she is doing on molecular theory. Her mind is as far away from molecules as any cogitating collection of little gray molecules can get.

Tara Petskin is thinking about romance.

And this may be a first.

She does not know how it happened. It makes absolutely no sense to her. She wants to pretend that it isn't true, that it isn't romance at all, but she knows better. She may not have experienced deep romance herself, but she recognizes it when she sees it. And she sees it now.

She would have expected it to happen like a thunderclap, that she would meet someone new, and somehow she would know... It might be at their first meeting, it might take a time or two, but it would quickly grow, and they would clasp hands and stare into each other's eyes, and maybe sing the odd love duet.

That is, after all, the way it happens in all the musicals.

The way it doesn't happen is after four years of constant exposure, working together day in and day out as merely colleagues. Teammates. Partners.

Over three years as partners. Never once with even a hint of a romantic interlude.

And let's face it, Invoice O'Connor is not exactly a matinee idol. It isn't as if he was a mere hair away from the starring role in Titanic and the only reason Leo got the role is his uncle in the catering business. Invoice is overweight, he's got a lousy complexion, he's certainly immature when it comes to girls--

And nonetheless, Tara knows that, from nowhere, she has suddenly, unmistakably, irretrievably, gone bonkers over him. And how does she know that? Because they just had a big fight and he walked out on her to become, of all things, an LDer.

Lincoln Douglas. Policy. The Montagues and Capulets of Forensics.

"Tara!" Her mother's voice. "Dinner's ready!"

"I'll be right there," she calls back.

Tara shakes her head clear of its baffling thoughts. Invoice O'Connor. Capulets? Montagues?

Life was so much simpler when Seth was still the coach, Tara and Invoice were merely policy partners, and all was right with the debate world.

How will Camelia use her ownership of Buglaroni?

Will Buglaroni catch the late bus?

Will Tara express her affection for Invoice?

Will Bill Gates ever get Vista to work?

There's a good chance you won't find out in our next episode: "Bullwinkle: Talking Moose or Teletubby Expletive?"