



Episode 78

The Other Imperative

Oh, for the good old days of understanding humanity. Things were simpler then. Summers were warm and tinkly, with shards of white light cutting the leafy tree tops, the hum of an insect with better things on its mind than bothering you, a passing breeze that halfheartedly threatened to turn the page of the book on your lap, itself a musty-smelling novel you had unearthed from the furthest depths of the public library, a story of times past even more bemisted by the myopia of memory than this golden summer's afternoon. Autumns were cool enough for sweaters but never rainy, and the color dance of the changing leaves lasted well into November, mixing the sugary smell of a cider press with the baking of fresh pies and putting up the year's preserves in the giant boiling pot and the last tomato, now sitting on the kitchen counter, that had somehow outlived the first frost, the last survivor the season past. Winters were all Christmas every day, making decorations by hand by planing wood chips to make swirling angel wings, stringing leis of stale popcorn after three days of mock agony because no one allowed any popcorn to sit in the house longer than five minutes and you know you can't string the kernels together until they get that soggy extra twenty-four hours under their belts, a never ending parade in and out of the kitchen where the spells of magical recipes that only appeared for the holiday were once again cast, doors suddenly shut as a parent barks an unexpected "You can't come in here now" as closets are rummaged and papers folded and ribbons tied and suddenly there were new boxes under the tree with their eternal promise and mystery. And Springs were buds on everything, and school ending next week as you sat in the back of the class surreptitiously pulling your feet out of your shoes to dangle them free because you were so small that they didn't reach the floor yet when you sat and you wanted to try out what it would be like next week when you could run around the back yard barefoot, and a few years later you began to understand the fever that the first warm days could roll over your heart and you thought that you really wanted to go to the dance with that special person and how were you ever going to get up the nerve to do something about it?

Oh, for the good old days of understanding humanity. When the grownup folks sat on the front porch swatting mosquitoes and sipping lemonade and arguing if Hobbes was write about the state of nature and the brutality of man, or if Rousseau had been closer to hitting the nail on the

head with his noble savage. Was man inherently good or inherently bad? How had his Creator formed him? Wasn't original sin nothing more or less than an admission of man's innate evil?

Wasn't it great to refer to people as man and not have to duck for fear of the PC police? Oh, for the good old days of understanding humanity. When popular science could categorically claim that the thing that separated man from the apes, the very concept that made a man out of apes in the first place, was the territorial imperative. It was the idea of "This is mine" -- my space, my place -- that had apparently led to every glory that is civilization. No longer sitting in the trees like mobile coconuts, our ancestors dropped to the ground and stood erect and picked up... a tool! With their hands made free by bipedal locomotion they evolved opposable thumbs and went from rocks to rocket ships. The territorial imperative -- the claiming and protection of my territory -- was the true monolith that sent the message into the australopithecines that it was time to throw that bone into the air and put on those Strauss waltzes and make Cinerama movies. Open the pod door, Hal.

Oh, for the good old days of understanding humanity. When things were clear and straightforward. Before scientists realized that nothing is new in man, that every aspect of our minds, with the possible exception of an appreciation of the Three Stooges, is evolved from our ancestors. Our thoughts, our dreams, our aspirations, are nothing more than extensions of the thoughts and dreams and aspirations of the original lemur-like creature from which we draw our original line of genetic selfhood. Countless generations of the forces of time, molding us not teleologically into the perfection of humanity, but haphazardly, into the imperfection of humanity. Oh, for the good old days of understanding humanity. It was a hell of a lot easier to live in the Dark Ages, with clear-cut right and wrong and clear-cut gods and demons. Well, maybe not that much easier in some respects, since for one thing deodorants hadn't been invented, but at least thinking was easier.

Still, some concepts have survived the evolution of thought fairly intact, and chief among these is the existence of a territorial imperative. The TI may no longer be our *raison d'etre* or our teleological primal cause, but it exists nonetheless. Birds do it, bees do it, even Speechies, if you please, do it. Find your space, mark it, defend it, because it's yours.

Same seats. I called it.

I will draw a line in the sand.

Good fences make good neighbors.

Stick to your own kind.

Home is where the heart is.

Torts.

The Nighten Day table in the Manhattan Lodestone cafeteria.

The turf was originally staked out between the first and second rounds on Friday night. There is nothing special about the location of this table compared to the locations of the other tables; like most high school cafeterias, the design of Manhattan Lodestone's industrial eating space does not comprise variant desirabilities. It is much of a muchness throughout, surrounded by pale green walls that inhibit the appetite and move teenaged stomachs in and out with the least amount of fanfare during the daily lunch periods. The tables are round, seating six comfortably, seating eight intimately, seating ten immorally. The chairs are metal, based on designs proposed by J.I. Guillotin when he wasn't addressing the issue of the kinder, gentler execution. The mathematics of the chairs and tables, which is quickly tested at the Lodestone, proves that the number of the former is too small, even at the comfortable level, to meet the expectations of the latter. So, not only does the first staking of turf require grabbing a table (or, if your team is large enough, two tables), but also summoning the correct number of seats from neighboring tables, all of which are guarded by turf-stakers with a similar idea.

It might look to the uneducated eye as if the original position, vis-a-vis cafeteria seating, is the Hobbesian state of nature. But while forensics tournaments are often nasty and brutish, they are seldom short, and Lockean -- nay, even a Rousseauian -- gentility comes to reign. To wit, the Nighten Day team on Friday consisted of Griot, Jasmine, Ellie and Trat, plus their coach, Tarnish Jutmoll. As a loner representing Bisonette Technical, Chesney Nutmilk locked on to Nighten Day's coordinates even before the opening ceremony, which adds him and his mother to the mix. Theoretically, seven seats are needed, although two of these are rotating chairs, as neither Tarnish nor Amnea will spend all their down time with the team, so while it is possible that seven chairs might be needed at any one time, reasonably six -- the epitome of comfort, as we've already established -- will do the job.

Easy. They quickly claim a table with six chairs. *Fait accompli*? No way.

Each participant in the tournament comes with baggage, mostly backpacks. Newcomers to the territorial cafeteria game might initially toss their backpacks on the table, or on the floor next to their chairs. Bad idea. Sooner or later you will want to use the table for something other than a Left-Luggage kiosk, so the table is temporary at best, while the floor, where people can trip over your bag and knock the hard drive in your laptop back to the stone age and crush your Walkman like a walnut, has its obvious hazards, the worst of these only making itself known over time, when a pile of backpacks has congealed looking like barnacles on the Titanic, and the realization comes to the owners that there are precisely two manufacturers of backpacks and they make them all in one model. The solution is to find a chair for your backpack, and to make this obviously greedy chair use semi-acceptable, to throw your coat or sports jacket over the chair as well, to make it look not as if you are hogging two chairs, one for you and one for your stuff, but that

you have just gone away, and this is your message to the other apes that this chair is yours, you'll be back in a minute, hands off or I'll bop you over the head with a mammoth's jawbone.

There is another reason to acquire extra chairs early at the Vaganza, and to mark them with the spoor of your accouterments, and that is to have them available on Sunday when the rest of your team arrives. Only the most farsighted realize this on a Friday night, but include among them Griot, whose first action was to acquire enough chairs for his entire LD team plus the Speechies, even though the Speechies won't be coming.

Griot has never been accused of under-planning.

The problem with these tactics is that they are not reserved only to the Nighten Dayers. Virtually every team has experienced turf-stakers, and everyone has the same thought.

What to do?

The amazing thing is that there is something to do, and it is always done. Because of the dynamics of the competition, there is never a moment when everyone is in the cafeteria at the same time, even if (or perhaps especially if) the directors of the tournament have planned for this to happen. So there is a constant shifting of personnel, and a constant readjusting of the numbers of people at any table. For the most part, although there are occasional exceptions, this is what happens. Any seat with no one in it is fair game, and will be grabbed freely from one table and pulled to another, with little notice of its disappearance by those gathered at the first table, unless the previous occupant is truly coming back in a minute, in which case the purloinment is halted in mid-purl, and the purloiner heads to another table. If there are no empty seats, then any seat with a backpack/jacket on it becomes hors de combat. The backpack/jacket hits the floor like veterans at the sound of incoming, and the chair is gone, and that is the end of it.

Constant flux. Constant movement. The experienced forensician does not wait until a chair is needed to grab a free one. The territorial imperative demands that at any table the sitters possess the most chairs possible. Success at the territorial imperative is measured by your ability to come and go in the cafeteria and always find a seat available at your table.

Griot and Jasmine are unspoken, unchallenged leaders of forensics territoriality. They do not even know that they are doing it, but do it they do, regularly, intently, over the entire duration of this or any tournament.

Griot and Jasmine. They would have made great australopithecines. Or whatever it was that bared its teeth and originally grunted, this is mine, savannah-head. Keep out.

Of such is humanity comprised.

By ten o'clock Sunday morning, just about everyone who will be coming to the last day of the Vaganza is in the building, and the Nighten Day table is surrounded by its full contingent of both

Nighten Day and Bisonette debaters. Jasmine has begun doing her physics homework. She has dropped in double octos to Robinski Dan McGrew, who she imagines was at the top of the pairings while she was at the bottom. In the elimination rounds, as in most competitive activities, the highest seed is paired against the lowest, the second seed against the second lowest, and so forth down the line in such a way as to insure that, theoretically, number one and number two won't eliminate each other, thus potentially setting up the best possible final round. It seldom works out that way in forensics, as compared to, say, tennis, but it looks good on paper. Jasmine is not thrilled to be out of the competition, but she is not unhappy either. Placing at all at the Vaganza is an accomplishment; she will not acquire a Combat of Conquerors limb for her work this weekend, but she knows she has debated well against some of the best competition in the country, and that is good enough for her. Griot is sitting next to her on one side, and Chesney is on the other. They are both still in the game, eagerly awaiting the next postings which are sure to arrive any minute. The nice thing about schematics in elimination rounds when the result of your previous round is disclosed is that you don't have to worry about still being in there, you just have to worry about who you're up against. In any case, both Griot and Chesney have achieved COC limbs, so they're pretty content no matter what happens.

Also at the table are the Tarleton twins, Hamlet P. Buglaroni, Disney Davidson, Gloria Fudless, Camelia Maru, Binko and Worm Padrewski. Amnea Nutmilk and Tarnish Jutmoll are standing next to the table, cardboard cups of Starbuck's coffee in their hands, talking animatedly about Francois Truffaut. Also in the room are Lisa Torte, Invoice O'Connor, Seth B. Obomash, and Tara Petskin, not to mention the Round Robinskis, Chip Dwindle, Dr. Tango (who spent the entire day Saturday in the judges' lounge reading *How The Mind Works*, which, as a psychiatrist, one would imagine she already knows), Tilde Hyphen-Emdash and her Algren-On-the-Beach coach Nip Soza, and maybe two hundred other assorted debaters, coaches, judges, parents, hangers-on, groupies, sycophants and myrmidons, not to mention the two homeless men who smelled the morning's shipment from Dunkin' Donuts and managed to get past the front door guard because it was impossible to distinguish them from the rest of the group.

It is a situation rife with possibilities...

Is the territorial imperative merely another name for musical chairs?

Why exactly am I reading this stuff when I should be sniffing the glue on fresh new composition books?

Is the fact that nothing happens in this episode a hint of things to come?

Aren't we about due for another Star Trek TV show?

We don't know, and you don't know, and no one will ever know, including seers who have already read our next episode: "Beans Are Not the Excuse They Used to Be, or, Don't Mess With My Toot Toot."