

BABBLE

A COMEDY IN TWO ACTS

by
Bradley Walton



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ACT I

SCENE 1 – MR. STEWART’S CLASSROOM, EARLY AUTUMN

AT RISE: MR. STEWART is lecturing at the front of his classroom. KENNY HOPGOOD, LUCY, BRENNAN, and STUDENTS 1-7 are sitting in desks.

STEWART: So. What was your impression of last night’s reading assignment—*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*?

(LUCY raises her hand.)

HOPGOOD: Dude...

STEWART: Mr. Hopgood, please remember to raise your hand.

HOPGOOD: Right. (raises his hand) Sorry.

STEWART: Thank you. Now, before you say what you’re going to say, let me say something. I know what you’re going to say and I want you think about the third word of the sentence that’s sitting on your tongue, and I want you to come up with a different word. Got it?

HOPGOOD: Uh-huh.

STEWART: Good. Okay. Go.

HOPGOOD: That was completely—

STEWART: Fourth word! Fourth word!

HOPGOOD: —messed up!

STEWART: Thank you. Would you care to elaborate as to why you think the poem is completely messed up?

HOPGOOD: Nah.

STEWART: Okay, then...anyone else?

(LUCY raises her hand.)

STEWART: Lucy?

LUCY: I think what Kenny is trying to say is that the heavy confluence of supernatural elements without the presence of an axe murderer is perplexing to the casual contemporary reader.

STEWART: Good observation, Lucy. Any others? Mr. Brennan, how about you?

BRENNAN: I agreed with Hopgood.

STEWART: Why so?

BRENNAN: (Beat.) Well, for one thing, because it’s poetry. And poetry by the virtue of what it is—it’s gonna be messed up. Poetry’s not about conveying information. It’s about expressing abstract concepts in abstract ways. It’s about not talking about what you’re actually talking about and talking around it in the hope that the audience is smart enough to figure out your point, or better still, making up a point of their own if you’re not doing anything except spewing lofty-sounding ideological flatulence into the breeze.

STEWART: You don’t like poetry very much, do you, Mr. Brennan?

BRENNAN: It’s okay, I guess. I mean, if you’re into that kind of thing.

STEWART: What did you think of this particular poem?

BRENNAN: It’s a dictionary-perfect example of what I was just saying. Loads of imagery out the wazoo, but obtuse. It would be fascinating if Coleridge just came out and said what was on his mind, but it probably wouldn’t be as interesting if it was readily comprehensible, and I doubt we’d be bothering with it in English class.

STEWART: That’s an excellent point. Why do you think he chose to frame the mariner’s tale around the wedding guest?

BRENNAN: Why does anybody use a framing sequence? It forces you to examine the poem from multiple perspectives. It’s the poet’s way of saying, “Hey! Look at this! It’s multifaceted like a diamond and layered like stack of monkeys! See how clever I am! Find my meaning—I dare you!”

STEWART: And so without the framing device, the poem is about sin and punishment, but with the framing device, it’s actually about confession and penance.

BRENNAN: Exactly.

STEWART: You didn’t actually read it, did you?

BRENNAN: Poems aren’t meant to be read. They’re a feast for the soul that’s ingested through the eyes and digested in the brain.

HOPGOOD: So discussing it in class would be like your brain goin’ to the bathroom?

BRENNAN: That’s a really good point.

STEWART: Mr. Hopgood...

HOPGOOD: I never thought of it like that before.

STUDENT 1: I never want to think of it like that again.

STUDENT 2: That's gross.

STUDENT 3: I knew there was a reason I thought school was a load of—

STEWART: That's enough! Let's move on. Why did the mariner shoot the albatross?

STUDENT 4: 'Cause it messed up his windshield!

STEWART: Fine. Everybody get out a sheet of paper. Give me a hundred word essay explaining why the mariner shot the albatross.

STUDENT 5: A hundred words?

STUDENT 6: That's like...a hundred words.

STUDENT 7: (to STUDENT 4) Way to go, big mouth.

STEWART: Quietly. Or it's a hundred and fifty. Mr. Brennan, I need to ask you a question. Could you come out to the hall with me?

BRENNAN: What'd I do?

STEWART: Nothing. Probably.

(STEWART and BRENNAN exit the room.)

STEWART: Why did the mariner shoot the albatross?

BRENNAN: Why does anybody do something to anything? Because it's there. I mean, there's always a motive, but at the end of the day, it's because it's there. Why did Luke Skywalker blow up the Death Star? Sure, you could go on about how the empire was evil and the galaxy needed to be saved, but if the Death Star hadn't been there in the first place, he wouldn't have bothered. Why did Godzilla destroy Tokyo? You can go on and on about nuclear symbolism, but the bottom line is, Tokyo was there. And you can argue that the mariner was jerk or had an unhappy childhood or that the albatross had it coming, but the only explanation that really matters is that it was there.

STEWART: That's an excellent answer.

BRENNAN: Thanks.

STEWART: Now tell me, did you read the poem?

BRENNAN: You already asked me that and I answered it.

STEWART: Did you read it? Yes or no?

BRENNAN: You realize "yes and "no" are abstract concepts and as such, they're not fit as a basis to form a judgment.

STEWART: And you could go on about that until we both died of old age, couldn't you?

BRENNAN: Probably. Anything else you wanted to talk about?

STEWART: What do you know about forensics? Five words or less.

BRENNAN: Police. CSI. Dead bodies.

STEWART: There's another kind of forensics that has nothing to do with any of that. It's competitive public speaking. I coach it. I think you'd be good at it.

BRENNAN: Like debate?

STEWART: Well, there's that too, but what I coach—there are several categories. One involves reading poetry. Several resemble acting. There's one called extemporaneous speaking that involves speaking about current events.

BRENNAN: I don't keep up with the news.

STEWART: I wasn't going to suggest that for you anyway.

BRENNAN: What were you going to suggest?

STEWART: Impromptu.

BRENNAN: What's that?

STEWART: In a nutshell, it involves talking off the top of your head and sounding like you're making sense.

BRENNAN: Like spewing random brain matter?

STEWART: Random brain matter aimed at a particular target.

BRENNAN: What's the target?

STEWART: You get handed three topics and you pick one. Might be three objects. Might be three famous quotations. Might be three famous people. Might be—

BRENNAN: Fame is kind of subjective. Country singers are considered famous, but I don't listen to country. Supreme court justices are probably considered famous too, but I don't tend to follow the supreme court.

STEWART: It's entirely possible that you'd get handed three topics you'd know nothing about.

BRENNAN: And then what would I do?

STEWART: Be yourself.

BRENNAN: What's that supposed to mean?

STEWART: Talk around the topic while giving your audience the impression that you're talking about it.

BRENNAN: Like a politician.

STEWART: I thought you didn't follow current events.

BRENNAN: I've heard stories. Why would I want to do this?

STEWART: Copper Valley High School has an excellent forensics team. We're consistently one of the top ten in the state every year.

BRENNAN: That's not bad.

STEWART: No, it's not.

BRENNAN: Do you think you're a good coach?

STEWART: Yes. I'm a good coach. But more importantly, I'm a great recruiter. I have an ear for talent. Last year I recruited Lucy Webster.

BRENNAN: The girl in my English class here? She seems pretty smart.

STEWART: She's brilliant. And she's even better with politics and current events than she is with literature. She made it to the final round of the state tournament as a freshman and I expect her to take top honors this year.

BRENNAN: You think I'd be that good at this?

STEWART: I think you could be great.

BRENNAN: Why "could" and not "would"?

STEWART: Talent only gets you so far. Attitude and discipline count for a lot. I don't know if you've got those.

BRENNAN: What's in it for me?

STEWART: Recognition. Awards. Bonus points on your college application. (*beat*) You'd probably find it personally fulfilling.

BRENNAN: How long do I have to talk?

STEWART: You've got a maximum of seven minutes to prepare and give your speech, and you can divide that up however you want. You can prep for two minutes and speak for five, prep for three and speak for four—whatever you need to do.

BRENNAN: I don't need time to prep a speech.

STEWART: I know.

BRENNAN: If I were to do this...

STEWART: Yes?

BRENNAN: And if I was as good as you think I'd be...you'd look good by extension wouldn't you?

STEWART: Yes, I would. But I'm not going to do you any special favors, if that's what you're getting at.

BRENNAN: Not asking for any. But do you remember last year when you confiscated my cell phone?

STEWART: No.

BRENNAN: I do.

STEWART: I didn't teach you last year. I didn't even know you.

BRENNAN: It was in the hall.

STEWART: Then I might've. I don't remember, but I might've.

BRENNAN: Trust me, you did.

STEWART: If I did, then you were using your cell phone during school hours and I was doing my job.

BRENNAN: No argument. But I wasn't happy about it and I don't feel inclined to do you any favors now. If I join the team, then we need to balance the scales.

STEWART: Forget it.

BRENNAN: If I join the team--

STEWART: I said forget it. You know what I said about attitude? Yours sucks.

BRENNAN: If I join the team, then Kenny Hopgood joins with me.

STEWART: Hopgood?

BRENNAN: Yeah. Bathroom brain.

STEWART: Are the two of you even friends?

BRENNAN: Heck, no.

STEWART: Then...why? He doesn't have any aptitude for this at all.

BRENNAN: Yeah. I know. I figure however many I win for you and the team, he'll come in dead last. It balances out.

STEWART: You act like this and you think I'm going to even want to coach you?

BRENNAN: I don't want you to coach me. I don't need you to. Just put me in and I'll bring home the trophies.

STEWART: You arrogant snot. Fine. I'll get Hopgood. And I'll *coach* him. He's not too bright, but he tries. That's all I need. We'll see who does better.

BRENNAN: Okay. You're on.

STEWART: Go write your essay.

BRENNAN: Write the essay? You pulled me out here...I thought—

STEWART: Guess you must've been wrong. Wonder what the odds are that could happen again? Go. Write.

(BRENNAN goes back in the room and sits at his desk.)

STEWART: Hopgood. *Hopgood*. Oh, crud. What've I gotten myself into?

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 2 – MR. STEWART'S CLASSROOM, THE NEXT DAY

MR. STEWART and HOPGOOD are standing at the front of the room, talking.

HOPGOOD: You want me to talk in front of people?

STEWART: That's right.

HOPGOOD: At competitions?

STEWART: Yes.

HOPGOOD: Are you crazy?

STEWART: Why would you think that?

HOPGOOD: You barely let me speak in class with the door closed. Why would you want to put me in some kind of tournament?

STEWART: I think it would be good for you. It would teach you to be more conscious of your language and improve your control over what comes out of your mouth.

HOPGOOD: Seems kinda death wishy to me.

STEWART: But, see, just since the beginning of the year, the number of curse words that you let loose each week has dropped substantially from something like twenty to oh...about maybe ten. That's a very big improvement. I'm quite proud of you.

HOPGOOD: Really?

STEWART: Absolutely.

HOPGOOD: You think I could do this?

STEWART: It would take work.

HOPGOOD: But you're willing to work with me?

STEWART: (*forcing out the words with difficulty*) I am.

HOPGOOD: I...wow. That's really—

STEWART: Language.

HOPGOOD: Really mother lovin' cool of you. So I guess. Yeah. I'll do it.

(*STEWART inhales and exhales deeply.*)

HOPGOOD: Wow. I never would have seen myself doing this.

STEWART: I'm sure you're not the only one.

HOPGOOD: Thanks. This means a lot.

STEWART: Right. Well. You're welcome. Um. Listen, it's not a done deal yet, but I think Jack Brennan is going to join the forensics team as well.

HOPGOOD: For real?

STEWART: Yeah. Probably so.

HOPGOOD: Huh. Wouldn't have seen that coming. I mean, he's cool, but he seemed really cheesed off after you took his cell phone that one time last year.

STEWART: (*trying not to look surprised*) Life's full of surprises.

HOPGOOD: So we'd be on the team together?

STEWART: Well, you probably won't practice together...I tend to do practices one-on-one with each team member, but you'd be going to the tournaments together and probably competing against each other.

HOPGOOD: Whoa. Wait. What?

STEWART: You'd both be competing in the impromptu category, and so you'd be competing against each other.

HOPGOOD: I'll lose.

STEWART: You might surprise yourself. Think of it as a learning opportunity.

HOPGOOD: What do I have to talk about?

STEWART: You'll be given topics to choose from.

HOPGOOD: What if I can't think of anything to say about my topic?

STEWART: Then think of something you do know about and try to draw parallels between the two—compare and contrast, that sort of thing.

HOPGOOD: So like, if I was supposed to talk about love but couldn't think of anything to say about love, I could talk about toilets and how love is like the toilet of the soul or something.

STEWART: I don't know that I'd recommend it, but in theory I suppose you could.

HOPGOOD: Hm. Okay. I guess I'll try.

STEWART: Good. Great. So. Tell me...what are your grades like?

HOPGOOD: Why do you wanna know?

STEWART: Well, your grades aren't an issue to compete in our local forensics league, but to be eligible for the state forensics league, they have to be somewhat decent.

HOPGOOD: How decent?

STEWART: Not failing anything. Now, you have a very solid D average in my class, so we're good here. How about the rest? Everything else is easily a D or better, right?

HOPGOOD: Um.

STEWART: You seem uncertain about this.

HOPGOOD: I'm not sure.

STEWART: How can you not be sure?

HOPGOOD: It's not like I really keep track.

STEWART: You don't keep track of your grades?

HOPGOOD: Never seemed important.

STEWART: No. Of course not. Um. Your last report card. Do you remember what was on it, or is it somewhere you can get to it?

HOPGOOD: I think the custodians empty the trash cans every day.

STEWART: That could be a problem, then.

HOPGOOD: Whatta we do?

STEWART: I'll check with the guidance department. (*Trying to convince himself.*) I'm sure we have nothing to worry about.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 3 – THE GUIDANCE DEPARTMENT, THAT AFTERNOON

MISS BENSON, the guidance secretary, is seated at a large desk, atop which sits a computer. STEWART is standing next to the desk.

BENSON: What's the kid's name again?

STEWART: Hopgood.

BENSON: How do you spell that?

STEWART: Just like it sounds.

BENSON: It sounded like you said Hopgood.

STEWART: I did.

BENSON: As in to hop good?

STEWART: Yes. Except that that would be grammatically incorrect. It would be hop well.

BENSON: So the kid's name is Hopwell?

STEWART: No, it's Hopgood.

BENSON: But you said that was grammatically incorrect.

STEWART: No, Miss Benson. I said that to hop good would be grammatically incorrect. Hopgood is his last name. There's nothing grammatical about it.

BENSON: Then why did you say—

STEWART: Because I'm an idiot. Are you happy now?

BENSON: You admit you're an idiot, but you're teaching high school?

STEWART: How about if I said one of us was an idiot but I didn't specify who?

BENSON: Then you might be inferring that I was an idiot.

STEWART: I wouldn't be inferring anything. I'd be implying.

BENSON: Oh. I guess that would be okay. What were we talking about again?

STEWART: Kenneth Hopgood. He's a student. He's joining the forensics team. I need to know his grades to make sure he's eligible.

BENSON: There's a forensics team?

STEWART: Public speaking forensics. Not CSI forensics.

BENSON: Oh.

STEWART: Can you look up Kenny's grades for me, please?

BENSON: Do you have many kids involved? In forensics?

STEWART: It varies, but I usually take 3-4 people to states every year.

BENSON: If you did CSI forensics, I bet you'd have a lot more interest.

STEWART: I doubt that there are many school supply catalogs that sell crime scenes with dead bodies. And if there were, I suspect they'd be rather expensive.

BENSON: There are catalogs that sell crime scenes without dead bodies?

STEWART: I haven't looked recently. Could you please look up Kenny's grades?

BENSON: Don't get all testy. Geez. All right. Let's see. Hopgood. Yeah. Here he is. And his grades...wow.

STEWART: It's entirely too much to hope that was a good wow, isn't it?

BENSON: His grades are...

STEWART: In the toilet?

BENSON: Well, I don't know that I'd say in the toilet, exactly...

STEWART: Standing outside the restroom?

BENSON: More like teetering precariously on a Vaseline-coated toilet seat.

STEWART: You should meet Kenny. I bet the two of you would really hit it off.

BENSON: Why do you say that?

STEWART: Just a hunch. Tell me, what kind of grades constitute the scenario you just described?

BENSON: He's got straight D's across the board.

STEWART: That...could be worse. I can work with that.

BENSON: With an F in his history class.

STEWART: Oh—

BENSON: (*Cutting STEWART off.*) This is a public high school. Don't say it.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 4 – STEWART’S CLASSROOM, THE NEXT MORNING

LUCY and STEWART are standing by STEWART’s desk at the front of the classroom.

LUCY: (*Incredulous.*) Kenny Hopgood?

STEWART: Lucy, could you please make at least a little bit of an effort to hide the disapproval in your voice?

LUCY: He’s—I guess he’s okay. I don’t know. It’s just that he swears a lot and obsesses over toilets more than your average forensics person.

STEWART: I noticed.

LUCY: And he’s—I don’t want to say that he’s dumb, but...

STEWART: But?

LUCY: Well, he comes across as a few kids’ meal toys short of a movie promotion, you know?

STEWART: That’s one way of looking at it, I suppose.

LUCY: Why do you want him on the team?

STEWART: It’s complicated. Just trust me, okay?

LUCY: You’re the coach.

STEWART: Right. I’m the coach. So as your coach, I’m asking for you to please tutor him in his history class.

LUCY: What?

STEWART: He’s struggling.

LUCY: What does that have to do with forensics?

STEWART: If he fails government, he won’t be eligible to participate in forensics.

LUCY: And so I ask again: This is someone you want on the forensics team?

STEWART: We can’t be snobs about this.

LUCY: Sure we can. It’s not like you’ve got screaming hoards clamoring to sign up. Most of the people on the team are students that you approach directly. You go after the smartest and most talented kids in the school. Kenny Hopgood does not fit that profile.

STEWART: I know. On the surface he may seem like an odd choice, but I think I can work with him.

LUCY: Then work with him. But leave me out of it. Please.

STEWART: I need you to do this.

LUCY: You’re the teacher.

STEWART: And in my subject area, I’m very good. But your aptitude for politics, history, and government far surpasses mine. You’re gifted at this. You should use those gifts.

LUCY: Are you trying to flatter me?

STEWART: Trying, yes.

LUCY: You’ll need to do better.

STEWART: Then think of it as a challenge. If you could pull Kenny’s average in history up to a D, that would be quite an accomplishment.

LUCY: Up to a D? His grades are that bad?

STEWART: I already said he was in danger of failing.

LUCY: In danger of failing means that his grades are on the brink. Or that they’re not great and they’re slipping. That’s not the same as pulling off a D being a great accomplishment. What’s his average now?

STEWART: I can’t tell you that. It’s private information.

LUCY: You want me to do this, you need to tell me what size miracle I need to pull off.

STEWART: He presently has a 32.

LUCY: A 32? 32 is somebody’s waist size...or their inseam...or their age or their credit rating. It’s not possible to have a grade that low...is it?

STEWART: You should see my grade book. Trust me, it’s possible.

LUCY: Is that salvageable?

STEWART: Well, a lot of it is that he doesn’t do his homework. If he wants to do forensics, he knows he’ll have to do better, so I think that part will come around on its own. But he told me that he doesn’t bother with his homework because he doesn’t understand it. That’s where you come in.

LUCY: Yay me.

STEWART: Yay you. Think you can do it?

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 5 – STEWART’S CLASSROOM AFTER SCHOOL, THE NEXT DAY

LUCY and HOPGOOD are in STEWART's classroom. A textbook and several pieces of paper are spread out in front of them.

LUCY: All right. Let's start with the basics. Why do we study history?

HOPGOOD: Because the superintendent hates teenagers.

LUCY: By studying history, a society can hopefully avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

HOPGOOD: Like what?

LUCY: Does the Bay of Pigs mean anything to you?

HOPGOOD: I think I saw a movie about that once... *Charlotte's Web* or *Deliverance* or something, right?

LUCY: Um. No. Let's try something different. You know the expression hindsight is 20/20?

HOPGOOD: Does that have something to do with being able to see out of your butt?

LUCY: No. Let's try something different. Pepsi. You've heard of Pepsi, right?

HOPGOOD: Yeah, I drink tons of that (*catching himself about to swear*)—um—stuff.

LUCY: Okay, good. Have you ever heard of Crystal Pepsi?

HOPGOOD: What the—

LUCY: Careful.

HOPGOOD: What the heck is Crystal Pepsi?

LUCY: Back in the early 90's, the Pepsi company put out a clear version of Pepsi. They called it Crystal Pepsi.

HOPGOOD: Uh-uh.

LUCY: Uh-huh.

HOPGOOD: You're messing with me.

LUCY: Truth. Honest.

HOPGOOD: Clear Pepsi?

LUCY: Yup.

HOPGOOD: As in tastes like a brown cola, looks like 7-Up?

LUCY: Exactly.

HOPGOOD: No way.

LUCY: Yes way.

HOPGOOD: Why?

LUCY: This is a history lesson and not a marketing lesson, so we won't go into the particulars. In a nutshell, somebody thought it would be a good idea.

HOPGOOD: Was it?

LUCY: You ever drink Crystal Pepsi?

HOPGOOD: No.

LUCY: There's a reason for that. It died almost as soon as it hit the market.

HOPGOOD: So it was a bad idea.

LUCY: It was a very bad idea.

HOPGOOD: That's messed up.

LUCY: So. Have you ever heard of Crystal Pepsi 2?

HOPGOOD: They tried it again? What, were they stupid?

LUCY: Nope. There is not, nor shall there ever be, such thing as Crystal Pepsi 2.

HOPGOOD: Oh.

LUCY: Because Pepsi will always look back on their mistake and they won't repeat it. That's not to say they won't make other mistakes...they just won't make the same one again. Hopefully. And just like cola companies can learn from their mistakes, countries can do the same thing. That's why we study history.

HOPGOOD: Huh. That kind of makes sense. But I'm not a country.

LUCY: You live in one. If you live long enough, one day you'll be old enough to vote. You need to be informed. Being informed means knowing some history.

HOPGOOD: Bummer. That sucks.

LUCY: Anything worthwhile takes work.

HOPGOOD: You think forensics is worthwhile?

LUCY: I'm a better speaker than I was a year ago. I can think faster and make a more convincing argument. So, yeah.

HOPGOOD: Could you convince somebody to bring back Crystal Pepsi? I wanna try it.

LUCY: I'm not that convincing.

HOPGOOD: 'Cause that would be ignoring history.

LUCY: You got it.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 6 – THE SCHOOL HALLWAY, A FEW DAYS LATER

LUCY is crossing the stage. BRENNAN enters.

BRENNAN: Lucy.

LUCY: Jack.

BRENNAN: I hear you've got a new study buddy.

LUCY: I'm tutoring Kenny Hopgood, yeah.

BRENNAN: I wasn't implying anything. You two just hanging out for the fun of it...no. The idea is so far out there I'd be insulting myself for bringing it up.

LUCY: You did just bring it up.

(MISS BENSON enters and crosses the stage.)

BRENNAN: You inferred that I was implying that you would actually spend time with him if you didn't have to, but I wasn't implying anything. So technically, you brought it up with your inference.

(MISS BENSON gives a perplexed scowl to BRENNAN and LUCY, then exits.)

LUCY: What was that?

BRENNAN: I don't know. She's a secretary. You can never tell what's up with them.

LUCY: I heard you joined the forensics team.

BRENNAN: You heard right.

LUCY: How's practice going?

BRENNAN: I'm not practicing.

LUCY: How can you not be practicing?

BRENNAN: It's easy. I don't practice by not practicing.

LUCY: That's kind of insulting to those of us who do practice by practicing.

BRENNAN: You already insult yourself, why does it bother you if I do it, too?

LUCY: You know, we've only been talking for about a minute, but I'm already starting to want my time back.

BRENNAN: You think your time is more valuable than mine?

LUCY: You know what? You already got one minute. You don't get two.

(LUCY exits. BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 7 – STEWART'S CLASSROOM, BEFORE SCHOOL THE NEXT DAY

STEWART is seated at his desk. HOPGOOD is standing.

STEWART: Ready for your first impromptu practice?

HOPGOOD: I guess.

STEWART: Here are your topics. *(hands HOPGOOD a small slip of paper and holds up a stopwatch)* Your time starts now.

HOPGOOD: *(looking at the paper)* A blender, a toaster, and a microwave oven. *(stares at the paper some more)*

STEWART: Clock's ticking.

HOPGOOD: Okay. Right.

(HOPGOOD sits at a desk and starts scribbling notes on a note card.)

STEWART: One minute down. Six to go. Remember, you want to have two or three main points along with an introduction and a conclusion.

(HOPGOOD stands, note card in hand.)

HOPGOOD: I chose the microwave oven.

STEWART: Okay, give me a more dynamic opening statement.

HOPGOOD: Like what?

STEWART: Like...“From zero to one hundred in seconds. No, it's not a sports car, it's an object found in every kitchen. The microwave oven has transformed our lives by heating our food at speeds never dreamed possible before its invention.”

HOPGOOD: That's kind of lame. If somebody started out a speech like that, I'd totally zone out.

STEWART: What would grab your attention?

HOPGOOD: “My mother was killed by an exploding microwave oven.”

STEWART: I'm sorry, I didn't know that.

HOPGOOD: No, not really. I was just saying that because I thought it'd be all dynamic and stuff.

STEWART: Ah, I see. Do be dynamic, yes...but don't lie if you can help it.

HOPGOOD: So if I can't help it, it's okay to lie?

STEWART: No, scratch that. Don't lie. No lying.

HOPGOOD: Bummer.

STEWART: Try again.

HOPGOOD: "Microwave ovens...suck!"

STEWART: Ooo-kay.

HOPGOOD: You can stick a mug of water in a microwave to make it boil. No biggie. But what if you want to do something really cool—like boil your toilet water? You could scoop out the water into a bunch of mugs—but that would take too long and get really boring, and who has that many mugs, anyway? No, if you're going to do it right, you need to put the whole toilet in the microwave. I mean, really, what's a toilet except for a big mug of water with hole in the bottom? It's so obvious, even my dog knows it. You put a mug of water on the bathroom floor. If he's thirsty, he'll bypass it and go straight to the toilet—he's not dumb—he knows the toilet is bigger and holds more refreshing, thirst-quenching goodness than some stupid, dinky mug. But how many microwave ovens are big enough to hold an entire toilet? None. And why is that? Mugs and toilets are made out of that same weird ceramic stuff. There's no reason you shouldn't be able to microwave a toilet, except for the lame lack of vision of the people who design microwave ovens. So the next time you want to boil your toilet water, your dreams are gonna be crushed.

STEWART: Was that all?

HOPGOOD: Yeah.

STEWART: Conclude your speech by saying, "Thank you."

HOPGOOD: Your dreams are gonna be crushed. Thank you.

STEWART: Okay. That was...strangely promising. Over the top maybe...

HOPGOOD: How do you mean?

STEWART: Well, I can't see anybody actually wanting to put a commode in a microwave.

HOPGOOD: Seriously? I always wanted to do it. I used to go to the big home supply store and measure the toilets and microwaves to see if I could ever find a set that I could do that with.

STEWART: Why?

HOPGOOD: Oh, come on. Think about it. You've seen a bowl of soup doing the slow twirl on the little platter in the microwave. You've seen a mug. Maybe a tray of macaroni. But you ain't never seen a toilet doing the spinny microwave dance thing. Never!

STEWART: Um. No.

HOPGOOD: I like to see stuff I ain't seen before. Cool stuff, anyway. Not like foreign art-house movies like *Ghandi* or boring stuff like that.

STEWART: Okay. Okay. Moving on. Let's just take the speech you gave at face value and go with it. You need to try to break it down into a coherent structure, as opposed to just talking. Your introduction would tell us that microwave ovens are bad because you can't effectively boil toilet water in them. That's your thesis. You need to support that with three points. Your first point could be the impracticality of scooping the toilet water into mugs. Point two would be a whole toilet won't fit inside a microwave oven. Point three is that there is no fundamental difference between a toilet and a mug of water other than size. You then discuss each of those points in detail. The stuff about your dog enjoying refreshing toiletry goodness can be your supporting argument for point three. Then you wrap it all up with a concluding statement about how people want to see and do things they've never experienced and how the lack of a microwave oven big enough to hold an entire toilet is keeping us from living happy, fulfilling lives. *(aside)* I can't believe I just said that.

HOPGOOD: Wow. That is so cool. You're pretty awesome, you know that?

STEWART: Think nothing of it. *(beat)* Please.

HOPGOOD: How was my time?

STEWART: *(Looking at his stopwatch.)* I'm sorry, for some reason I completely lost track. I'm sure it was fine. We'll both try to do better next time.

HOPGOOD: Sure.

STEWART: Excellent. How are your grades in your other classes?

HOPGOOD: C's and D's.

STEWART: And your history class?

HOPGOOD: I think I'm up to about a 50!

STEWART: Good work. Keep at it.

(LUCY enters.)

LUCY: Mr. Stewart, can I talk to you?

HOPGOOD: Hey, Lucy.

LUCY: Hey, Kenny.

STEWART: What do you need?

LUCY: It's kinda private.

STEWART: All right. Kenny, I'll see you in class later.

HOPGOOD: Sure.
LUCY: Thanks, Kenny.
HOPGOOD: No problem.

(HOPGOOD exits.)

LUCY: I talked to Jack Brennan yesterday. He says he's on the forensics team, but he's not practicing.
STEWART: *(sighs)* No, he's not.
LUCY: And you're letting him not practice?
STEWART: He and I reached something of a special agreement.
LUCY: That's really insulting to those of us who you do expect to practice.
STEWART: Yes, and I expect you to do well. I have no such expectations for him.
LUCY: What?
STEWART: He wants to throw himself out there and claim victory by virtue of his natural gifts. He needs to learn he can't do that. So I'm going to let him figure it out the hard way.
LUCY: You're going to let him go unprepared and fall on his face?
STEWART: Exactly.
LUCY: What if he wins? Won't that undercut your little lesson?
STEWART: I don't think that's going to happen.
LUCY: I think you need to consider the possibility. Yesterday was the first time I ever had a face-to-face conversation with Jack, and I hope it's the last, because he's a completely insufferable jerk. But I've heard him babble in class about things that I'm sure he knows absolutely nothing about, and I can tell that he's running his mouth without actually saying anything, but the smokescreen is brilliant. You stick him in a room with a group of average teenagers and he's going to blow them away, even if they've been prepared.
STEWART: Okay. It's a gamble. Obviously, I hope you're wrong. The first tournament with the local league is in three weeks. We'll find out.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 8 – THE FIRST LOCAL FORENSICS TOURNAMENT, THREE WEEKS LATER

BRENNAN and HOPGOOD are sitting at a cafeteria table. They are dressed nicely in suits and ties, if possible. Other COMPETITORS similarly dressed sit at nearby tables.

BRENNAN: You ready for this?
HOPGOOD: I don't know.
BRENNAN: Does Stewart think you're ready?
HOPGOOD: It's hard to say. He's trying to sound encouraging, but I've noticed that his forehead kind of twitches whenever I say the word "toilet."
BRENNAN: Do you say that a lot during your practices?
HOPGOOD: Not that often. Maybe six or eight times in each speech, but it's not like it's every other word.
BRENNAN: No. I can't see why that should bother him at all.
HOPGOOD: You nervous?
BRENNAN: Nah. Business as usual.
HOPGOOD: How can it be business as usual if you've never done this before?
BRENNAN: I do this all the time, just not at forensics tournaments.
HOPGOOD: I heard you weren't practicing.
BRENNAN: Seemed like a waste of time.
HOPGOOD: Probably would be for you. You're awesome.
BRENNAN: Thanks. That was kind of a sore point for Lucy.
HOPGOOD: She works really hard.
BRENNAN: Some people need to work hard.
HOPGOOD: I'm one of the ones that needs to. Totally.

BRENNAN: I hope you do...okay.
HOPGOOD: Thanks. I mean, I know you'll beat me, but thanks.
BRENNAN: Where's Lucy, anyway?
HOPGOOD: She was getting her stuff off the bus.
BRENNAN: Her stuff? It's not even an overnight trip. What'd she need to pack?

(LUCY enters, hauling a rolling cart with at least four plastic crates or file boxes on it. SHE is dressed professionally.)

LUCY: Anybody know where the library is?
BRENNAN: What's in the boxes?
LUCY: Current events magazines and files of news clippings.
BRENNAN: For what?
LUCY: Reference material for my speeches.
BRENNAN: But you don't get your topics until the tournament starts. How do you know what to prepare for?
LUCY: I don't. So I prepare for everything.
BRENNAN: That sounds like a lot of work.
LUCY: It is. And if I do well, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I earned it.
BRENNAN: If I win, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I earned it, too, except without all the wasted effort.
LUCY: I've never said this before, but I hope you lose.
HOPGOOD: Be cool. We're all on the same team here.
LUCY: The same school, maybe. But we're definitely not on the same team.

(LUCY exits, dragging the cart with her.)

HOPGOOD: What...was that irony...metaphor...something? I need to learn to analyze literature better. Maybe then I'd understand what people are trying to say.
BRENNAN: It's not a big deal. What happens during the tournament happens. I'm not worried at all.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 9 – THE IMPROMPTU ROUND, LATER THAT EVENING

BRENNAN, HOPGOOD, and IMPROMPTU SPEAKERS 1-4 are standing on the corner of the stage near a classroom setup. On one desk are a pencil and some note cards for the SPEAKERS. On another desk are a pencil and papers for the IMPROMPTU JUDGE. The IMPROMPTU JUDGE addresses the SPEAKERS.

JUDGE: Speaker one, please come into the room. The rest of you wait out in the hall until we call you.

(JUDGE and SPEAKER 1 enter the classroom. The lights dim on the OTHERS.)

SPEAKER 1: Where do you want me to stand?
JUDGE: Front of the room is fine. *(hands SPEAKER 1 a slip of paper)* Here are your topics. Note cards and pencil are on the desk there. You have seven minutes and your time starts now. *(clicks a stopwatch)*
SPEAKER 1: *(looking at topics)* "What I got for Christmas." "My 10th birthday." "My favorite halloween costume." I just pick one, right?
JUDGE: Right.

(SPEAKER 1 takes a deep breath, sits, and begins scribbling on a note card. There is a short pause.)

JUDGE: One minute down.
SPEAKER 1: Okay. I'm ready. *(stands)* Okay. Um. *(scratches head)* When I was ten years old *(scratches nose)* um, I had a very, very special birthday. I got um, a huge Lego set and um...

(Blackout. SPEAKER 1 sits at one of the classroom desks. As the lights come up, SPEAKER 2 stands at the front of the room.)

SPEAKER 2: *(staring intently at his note card without looking up from it at all)* It's like really hard to pick out just one special Halloween costume but I think my favorite one was Simba from *The Lion King* because when I was little I was like really really into *The Lion King* because it was like my most totally favorite movie and so I liked Simba a lot and plus I liked cats and Simba was a cat well not really like a real cat but a cartoon lion I mean baby lion and he had these really funny friends who—

(Blackout. SPEAKER 2 sits at one of the classroom desks. As the lights come up, SPEAKER 3 stands at the front of the room.)

SPEAKER 3: *(repeatedly gesturing, then letting his arm flop down, making a slapping noise against his leg with his hand)* Christmas at my house is kind of lame. *(slaps leg)* My dad gives weird gifts. *(slaps leg)* Last year I got a copy of the complete works of Charles Dickens, and it's autographed by Charles Dickens *(slaps leg)* except I don't think it's real because there's a photo of Daniel Radcliff as David Copperfield on the cover. *(slaps leg)*

(Blackout. SPEAKER 3 sits at one of the classroom desks. As the lights come up, BRENNAN stands at the front of the room.)

JUDGE: Here are your topics.

(BRENNAN looks at the slip of paper, hands it back to the judge, and immediately begins speaking with poise and confidence.)

BRENNAN: Christmas. The very word stirs emotions and memories in all of us. Christmas is a supposedly magical time of peace, fellowship and goodwill...of happy colors and hopeful symbolism. And by the very nature of the gift-giving associated with Christmas, each year we are left with mementos of the joyful season once it has passed. Mementos of the love and thoughtfulness of our family and friends that we can treasure for the rest of our years. Mementos like neck ties, socks, and restaurant gift cards redeemed for long-since forgotten meals. Truthfully speaking, do any of us really remember what we got for Christmas last year? Or the year before that? I don't. The sad fact is, it's been years since I received anything that made such an impression on me that it actually stuck in my mind. Were my Christmases happy? I'm sure that they were. Did I receive things that I wanted? I'm sure that I did. But nothing that stands out so vividly as to match the glow of Christmas itself. Christmas is an idea—a concept so powerful that its strength far outstrips any material object associated with it. And with every Christmas that passes, even as we become older and more jaded, we continue to immerse ourselves in the idea of Christmas, even though the physical realities never quite measure up. Some may view this as an act of repetitious futility. It's not. In reality, it is these rituals through which the idea of Christmas is renewed and reinforced and we continue to be swept along in its tide year after year. What did I get for Christmas? The reinforcement of an idea that is greater than I am. An idea that I am proud to be a part of. Because even with the rush, the crowds, and even the rampant materialism, the very idea of Christmas proves itself to be more indestructible and more pure than virtually anything else in the world, and there are much worse things to be a part of than that.

(Blackout. BRENNAN sits at one of the classroom desks. As the lights come up, SPEAKER 4 is standing at the front of the room, staring in mortal terror at the list of topics.)

JUDGE: Six minutes down.

(SPEAKER 4 makes a high-pitched squeaking noise. Blackout. SPEAKER 4 sits and as the lights come up, HOPGOOD stands at the front of the room.)

HOPGOOD: Birthdays. They're always a big deal. Especially for little kids. And for me, no birthday will ever be more memorable than my tenth birthday. Why? Because a tenth birthday is a rite of passage thing. Because I got really sick on my tenth birthday, and because the number ten is the absolute best number to write on paper. *(takes one step to his left)* A lot of people think that turning 21 is a big deal birthday because you can drink. Or that 18 is the important one because you're legally an adult. Or 16 because you can drive. Or 13 because you're finally a teenager and officially not a little kid anymore. And I don't mean to come down on any of that, but none of that don't mean nothing when you hold it up to birthday number ten. Because it's the only birthday you're ever gonna have when your age goes from one number to two. The first nine years of your life, you're just—this kid. And nobody takes you seriously. You wanna know why? Check out your age. One number. One lousy number. Even something that costs 99 cents has two numbers. An age doesn't get one of those little period thingies to show the fractational halves and make them look more impressive than they are. No, you gotta wait ten years—ten long, hard years—to gain the respect that comes from having a number with two numbers in your age. So my tenth birthday was a big deal 'cause of that. It was an even bigger deal 'cause on my tenth birthday I made my first trip back to the hospital since I was born, which brings me to my second point. *(takes one step to his right)* I got sicker than a meatloaf coffee pizza topped with Brussels sprouts and old motor oil. Maybe it was a virus. Maybe it was something I ate. I dunno. But I do know that my tenth birthday ruined my eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth birthdays because it wasn't until my fourteenth birthday that I could eat cake and ice cream again. You tend to lose your taste for stuff after it comes out your nose. I got so wiped out I spent the night in the hospital with an IV in my arm. Kinda sucked at the time, but at least it makes for interesting memories. *(takes one step to his right)* But the absolute coolest thing about turning 10 was that whenever I had to write my age down, for an entire year, I got to write the number 10. And if you scrunch the one and the zero right up together and make the one kind of thick, it looks like a toilet, and toilets are everyone's best friend. Especially if you get sick on your tenth birthday. *(takes one step to the left)* So in conclusion, my tenth birthday was one of the most memorable days of my life, because it was a rite of passage, because I got to spend hours of quality time with my buddy the toilet, and because it ushered in a whole year of being able to draw toilets whenever I was asked my age. I'll never have another birthday like that again. Thank you.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 10 – THE AWARDS CERMONY, LATER THAT EVENING

BRENNAN, HOPGOOD, LUCY, STEWART, IMPROMPTU JUDGE, IMPROMTU SPEAKERS 1-4, and other COMPETITORS are seated watching MS. LEARY, the tournament director, stand at a podium and give out awards.

LEARY: And our champion in Extemporaneous Speaking is Lucy Webster. Congratulations, Lucy.

(LUCY comes forward. LEARY hands her a blue ribbon and SHE returns to her seat. EVERYONE applauds politely for each winner.)

LEARY: And our final category is Impromptu. Our second place runner-up is...Jack Brennan. Congratulations, Jack.

(HOPGOOD smiles and slaps BRENNAN on the back. BRENNAN is surprised and irritated. HE sulks forward, takes the ribbon, and sulks back to his seat.)

LEARY: And our champion in Impromptu is...Kenny Hopgood.
(KENNY is surprised and elated. HE comes forward to receive his ribbon. STEWART is obviously pleased.)

LEARY: Congratulations, Kenny.

KENNY: Thanks, dude. *(returns to his seat)*

LEARY: That wraps things up for tonight. You can pick up your critique sheets in the lobby. Have a safe trip home.

(EVERYONE exits except for LUCY, BRENNAN, HOPGOOD, and STEWART.)

STEWART: Lucy, Kenny...good job.

LUCY: Congratulations, Kenny. Good job, Jack.

(BRENNAN glares at LUCY.)

HOPGOOD: Thanks, man. Wow, I don't believe it. I thought for sure Jack was gonna win.

STEWART: Did you see his speeches?

HOPGOOD: Nah. We were up against each other in round one, but I was last and I didn't get to see his speech. Round two, we were in different rooms.

STEWART: What did you think of Kenny's speech, Jack?

BRENNAN: Perfect. Don't change a thing.

HOPGOOD: Thanks. Hey, listen—don't be too bummed. You're better at this than me. We both know that. You just had a bad night. There's always gonna be times when life tries to use you as its toilet paper. But what you gotta do is—don't be toilet paper. You gotta be a beach towel! Clog the toilet and stop up the pipes, man!

(Pause. EVERYONE stares at HOPGOOD.)

LUCY: You actually tried to flush a beach towel once, didn't you?

HOPGOOD: Yeah. Bad move.

BRENNAN: Right. Thanks for the advice, Kenny. I'll uh...keep it in mind. *(to STEWART)* Can I talk to you for a minute?

STEWART: Sure. Lucy, Kenny...I'll see you on the bus.

(LUCY and HOPGOOD exit.)

STEWART: Is there a problem?

BRENNAN: Don't get snooty.

STEWART: I'm not. You did quite well for someone who never practiced.

BRENNAN: Don't give me that. I know what you're thinking.

STEWART: Your confidence crossed the line into arrogance. And asking for Kenny to be put on the team completely backfired on you. You got what you deserved. Better than you deserved, really.

BRENNAN: No way did I get better than I deserved. His speech was nothing but a mouthful of stupid. He used words like "stuff." He talked about toilets, for crying out loud! And his content was totally lopsided. His first point was way longer than his second and third points. And how am I supposed to compete effectively if I don't know I'm giving a three point speech, or that I'm supposed to walk?

STEWART: If you'd let me coach you, you would've learned these things.

BRENNAN: How hard is it for you to say, "Jack, give a three point speech and walk on each point"? That's not a practice.

That's two seconds worth of information. You couldn't take two seconds to tell me what I was supposed to be doing? That's the only reason he beat me. The only reason!

STEWART: It seems to me like we had something of a contest going between the two of us. I seem to be winning and you're not taking it very well. So. Would you like to just forget all of that and schedule a practice?

BRENNAN: No. Absolutely not. I know what I didn't know. I found out the hard way. I won't forget. I won't place second again. Every tournament from now until the state meet. And I'll do it without you.

(BLACKOUT.)

SCENE 11 – THE STATE TOURNAMENT AWARDS CEREMONY, SIX MONTHS LATER

The same setup of chairs from the previous awards ceremony may be used. If possible, a different podium should be used to suggest that this is a different tournament, or a sign may be attached to the podium which reads "State Forensics." LUCY and STEWART are talking, waiting for awards to begin. Seated nearby are AMBER CARPENTER, NICK HANNIGAN, EMMA MARSTERS, DANNY LENK, the IMPROMPTU JUDGE from the first tournament, and other CONTESTANTS.

LUCY: You think Kenny's got any chance of winning this?

STEWART: I haven't seen him to ask how he did today. But there's always a chance.

LUCY: That means no, doesn't it?

STEWART: I'm astounded that Kenny made it all the way to the state competition. I never dreamed he'd actually be good, much less pull all of his grades up. As long as he can talk about toilets, he's fine, and he's managed to make every single speech he's ever given about toilets in some form or another. And so far, he hasn't gotten a single judge who's seemed to mind.

LUCY: You think his lucky streak's going to run out today?

STEWART: Conversely, he's yet to win a single tournament since the first one back in October, so I'm not completely sure you can call it a lucky streak.

LUCY: Do you call Jack's seven consecutive wins a lucky streak?

STEWART: No more than I consider your eight consecutive wins a lucky streak. There's no luck involved. You're both simply brilliant in your categories.

LUCY: I'd love to see him try to answer a political question.

STEWART: He could probably bluff his way through it without knowing a thing about the topic.

LUCY: I want so badly for him to lose to Kenny today. Kenny deserves to win.

STEWART: The judges don't care who's nice and who's an arrogant jerk. It's not about that. And it shouldn't be.

Unfortunately, it's not about hard work, either. It's about who's the best speaker when they stand at the front of the room. That's it. That's all that matters.

(HOPGOOD enters.)

HOPGOOD: Hey, guys. How'd it go?

LUCY: Good. You?

HOPGOOD: I think I bombed it.

LUCY: What topic did you get?

HOPGOOD: Toilets.

STEWART: Toilets?

HOPGOOD: Yeah.

STEWART: They actually had toilets as an impromptu topic?

HOPGOOD: Yeah. For real.

STEWART: You should have nailed it, then.

HOPGOOD: Yeah, I should have, but it was like...I use toilets to talk about other stuff. I've never actually had to talk about...you know...toilets. And my instinct was to try to talk about toilets so I could talk about other toilets, but then I realized that wasn't going to work.

STEWART: What did you talk about?

HOPGOOD: Goats.

LUCY: Goats?

HOPGOOD: Yeah.

STEWART: How...what...

HOPGOOD: Like I said, I think I bombed it.

STEWART: Maybe not. I mean...you worked toilets into speeches about your birthday, professional wrestling, crayons, William Rhenquist (*or another Supreme Court Justice or political figure*), and a penny saved being a penny earned. Surely you could make goats and toilets go together.

HOPGOOD: Maybe. But I didn't do it today.

LUCY: How'd the other rounds go?

HOPGOOD: Good. But I think that first one is gonna sink it for me.

STEWART: I guess we'll find out soon.

LUCY: Did you watch Jack?

HOPGOOD: Yeah, in round two. He was awesome.

LUCY: Of course he was.

(BRENNAN enters. LUCY and STEWART look at him with loathing.)

BRENNAN: What?

LUCY and STEWART: Nothing.

HOPGOOD: Mr. Stewart, you think we have any chance of winning the team trophy today?

STEWART: Unfortunately, no. The team from Buffalo Run High School has won the past five years in a row, and it looks like they've got at least a dozen people competing. I've only got you two plus Jack. Even if we took two first places and a second, it probably wouldn't earn us enough points.

HOPGOOD: Bummer.

STEWART: Maybe next year.

(The IMPROMTU JUDGE crosses to BRENNAN.)

JUDGE: Hey, uh...excuse me. I judged you at the first tournament back at the beginning of the year.

BRENNAN: Yeah, I guess you did.

JUDGE: Listen, I wanted to let you know...that Christmas speech of yours...I just...I really enjoyed Christmas this year for the first time in a long time, and I think it might've been because of what you said. And well, thanks. I keep thinking about how I didn't rank it first at the time because it wasn't quite as technically proficient as the one about the birthday toilets, but in the long run it turns out that it's really meant a lot to me, and...and I wanted you to know.

BRENNAN: *(coldly)* Yeah. Whatever.

(The IMPROMPTU JUDGE returns to his seat.)

LUCY: *(pulling BRENNAN aside)* Do you think you possibly could have been any less gracious? That guy just—

BRENNAN: What do you mean, less gracious? Did you hear that? Can you believe the nerve? Not ranking me first and then coming up and telling me that I changed his life? Come on!

LUCY: Don't you care?

BRENNAN: No. Not really.

LUCY: Do you even believe whatever it was that you said in that speech?

BRENNAN: I have no idea what I said in that speech! It was just whatever popped into my head at the time.

(SARAH KRAMER, the state tournament director, enters. BRENNAN and LUCY sit.)

KRAMER: If I can have everyone's attention please, we're ready to begin with awards. First, I'd like to thank everyone for a great tournament. The judges were very complimentary of the way everyone conducted themselves today, and I'm very happy to report that there were no fires this year. Thank you for that. I know you're all very eager, so let's cut to the chase. Starting off with extemporaneous speaking. In third place, Amber Carpenter.

(AMBER goes to the podium and is handed a yellow ribbon. EVERYONE applauds politely as each winner goes to the podium throughout the awards.)

KRAMER: In second place, Nick Hannigan.

(NICK goes to the podium and is handed a red ribbon.)

KRAMER: And your extemporaneous speaking state champion is...Lucy Webster.

(LUCY goes to the podium and is handed a blue ribbon.)

KRAMER: In the category of impromptu...third place goes to Emma Marsters.

(EMMA goes to the podium and is handed a yellow ribbon.)

KRAMER: In second place, Danny Lenk.

(DANNY goes to the podium and is handed a red ribbon. HOPGOOD and BRENNAN look at each other.)

KRAMER: And your impromptu state champion is...Jack Brennan.

HOPGOOD: All right! Go Jack!

(BRENNAN goes to the podium and is handed a blue ribbon.)

KRAMER: In the category of Original Oratory, third place goes to...

(The lights dim for a moment. When they come back up, the awards are concluding.)

KRAMER: And that concludes this year's state forensics tournament. Thank you all for coming, and I hope you have a safe drive home.

(EVERYONE stands and exits, except for STEWART, BRENNAN, LUCY and HOPGOOD.)

STEWART: Congratulations, Lucy. I knew you could do it. Kenny, I'm sorry. Better luck next year.

HOPGOOD: Hey, don't be sorry. I never in a million years thought I could have done this at all, much less make it to the state tournament. I'm having a good day here. But I'm thinking...I feel like I've gone as far as I can go with impromptu. And I mean, Jack's pretty much the king, anyway. I wanna do this again, but I'm gonna try something different.

STEWART: Like what?

HOPGOOD: Poetry.

STEWART: *(coughs)* That's...that's a very interesting choice, Kenny.

HOPGOOD: Look, I can tell you think it's not such a hot idea. I get that, totally. And I'm not sure I can do it. But this year, I took on something I didn't think I could do. And I did it. I wanna see what else I can do.

STEWART: Fair enough. Next year, the poetry category is yours.

HOPGOOD: Thanks. You won't regret it. I hope.

STEWART: I know I won't.

HOPGOOD: Jack, awesome job.

BRENNAN: Thanks. *(to STEWART)* Didn't think I could pull it off, did you?

STEWART: Actually, after a while, it became pretty obvious that you would. You have a gift.

LUCY: Not that you have any practical knowledge to go with that gift.

STEWART: Lucy, that's enough.

LUCY: No it isn't. Congratulations, Jack. You won. And you did it without stretching or bettering yourself in the least little bit. You may have come in first, but Kenny got way more out of this than you did. All you got was a ribbon and an even bigger head. Well, let me tell you something. You can babble all you want, and you can make it sound sweeter than high fructose corn syrup, but in the end, anything meaningful that you actually say is nothing but an accident with no real wisdom or feeling behind it. You have no knowledge or insight to share. You just spout whatever pops into your head. When the day comes that you have to prove a point—to demonstrate that you know something and can support an opinion—you're going to be out of luck.

BRENNAN: You're talking about extemporaneous speaking, aren't you?

LUCY: You're darned right I am.

BRENNAN: Mr. Stewart, I want to change categories, too. Next year, I'm going to do extemp.

(BLACKOUT. Curtain.)

END OF FREE PREVIEW