Not a Chance

Doris Hermann*
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The tall, blond fellow untangled his legs from the rungs of the chair and slowly stood up. "Thanks," he said, giving me a wide grin. "We're going to try hard to win!"

I put out my hand. Shaking hands was as much a part of the ritual of a debate tournament as giving speeches. "I'm Ann Curtis, president of the debate club here. Do you mind if I sit in on this next debate?"

"We'd be glad to have you," the blond said. "I'm Bob Moore, and this is my colleague, Jim Carley."

He indicated a tall, good-looking Negro boy who was hovering behind his shoulder. I offered him my hand. "Hello, Jim. Didn't I see you at the hotel this morning?"

He took a step forward, hesitated a minute, then shook hands with me. "Yes," he said, "I was at the hotel this morning." A look of defiance came into his eyes as if he felt I was questioning his right to be at the hotel. Then his tense lips relaxed a little and a small flicker of pride appeared in his eyes. I knew he was thinking—Yes, I got to stay in the hotel! There wasn't any trouble at all. Of course, I have a room of my own, but at least I'm in the hotel with the rest of the gang! His mind came back to the present scene reluctantly. "We've enjoyed the tournament so far," he said quietly. His eyelid twitched, and his eyes looked big and white against his dark skin.

He was scared. The thought flashed through my mind. This Negro boy was trying hard to be one of the group, but he was on his guard. He was afraid someone would resent his being there. What could I do that would make him feel at ease? I made a quick decision.

"Would you fellows like to have dinner with some of our team tonight?"

Jim straightened up and looked at Bob out of the corner of his eye as if urging him to speak. "Would you like to?" I looked straight at Jim as I asked the question.

"I'd like to very much," he said and his eyes had a sparkle that I hadn't noticed before.
The chairman was speaking from the platform. "We're ready to start the debate. The question is 'Resolved: that a federal world government should be established.'"

I turned to the two boys standing beside me. "Good luck!" I said. "As long as my school is out of the running, I hope you fellows can win that trophy."

They both turned toward the platform. Jim started toward the stage, but stopped again and stood rigidly to one side until Bob started down the aisle. Then Jim followed like a tall, dark shadow.

The first speaker from the opposing team gave a fiery oration acclaiming the merits of the plan. Through it all Jim sat rigid on his straight-backed chair. His feet shuffled continuously on the wood floor and he turned the pencil in his hand from lead to eraser and back again. When it was his turn to speak, he quickly gathered together his notes and stood up stiffly. Each joint seemed to snap into action, instead of moving as a well-coordinated machine. I wanted to help him. My hand lifted in a weak effort, but fell again into my lap.

Jim crossed the stage, fumbled a book, but finally got it settled on the rostrum. His hands clenched the speaker's stand as he started to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen." He took a deep breath as if gathering courage and then continued, "Today we are debating a topic in which every American should be interested—the establishment of a federal world government." Gradually as the speech went on he started to move around the stage. He became more confident with each passing minute, and his words flowed in a steady stream of eloquence. "We need to make the whole world one community, but to do so we must have the cooperation of every nation."

As I sat there and watched his dark face pleading eloquently for the cause of unity and oneness among nations, I wished that he could have the opportunity to plead for equality in his own country. He was undoubtedly the best high school speaker I had ever heard—logical, sincere, fluent. I was on his side. The whole audience was on his side. I could sense it from the way they leaned forward in their seats listening attentively to every word.

Jim finished his speech, returned to his seat and sat there calmly listening to the other speakers. The pencil lay quiet on
the table and his feet were planted firmly on the floor. He was holding his head up now, not gazing at the table.

He's won, I told myself—not only the debate, but the fight within himself. He feels like one of us now.

When the debate was finished, Bob started across the platform to exchange greetings with the girls on the opposing team. Jim followed him, but halfway across the stage, his feet dragged and he almost stopped. It was not until the girls on the opposing team turned and smiled at him that he took the remaining steps and accepted their extended hands.

The chairman's voice interrupted again. "We will now adjourn to the assembly room where the trophy will be awarded!"

I hurried to the front of the room where Jim and Bob were gathering up their books and papers. "That was a swell debate," I told them. "I'm almost sure you won."

"Gee, I hope so." Bob said.

Jim continued to gather his papers together. His jaw muscles were tense. Other than that his face showed no emotion. The three of us walked to the assembly room together. I left the fellows to find a seat while I hurried up front to get the judge's decisions so I could make the award. They handed me the envelope and I walked up on the platform and stood behind the beautiful trophy. I searched the room and finally spotted Bob's blond head and Jim's black one about four rows from the front.

"On behalf of the Debate Club I would like to congratulate all of you for the excellent debating that has been done in this tournament." Jim was leaning back in his chair, but as he looked up at me his eyelid twitched several times. As I opened the envelope everyone in the whole assembly room leaned forward. I looked at the results. "I'm happy to award the trophy to the debate team of Bob Moore and Jim Carley. Will one of you boys please come forward?"

There was a silent struggle in the fourth row. Jim looked sideways at Bob without turning his head. Bob leaned further back in his chair and nodded to Jim.

As Jim came toward the stage, his whole face was glowing. Applause was following him down the aisle. I handed him the trophy, and he stood holding it proudly as he said, "Thank you! Thank you very much!" Tears glistened in his eyes as he moved back toward the members of his team.
We were walking down the street toward Morgan's Restaurant. Bob and Jim were taking turns carrying the trophy. About every twenty steps the trophy changed from Bob's hands to Jim's dark ones. They acted like a couple of kids with a new toy.

The lights were shining out of the clear plate glass window of the restaurant. Inside people were seated at tables covered with white linen cloths. The silver gleamed as it caught the rays of the fluorescent lights.

"Well, this is it," I said, "there's a table ready for us, so we should be able to feed the champs steak very soon!"

I made my way to the big table I had reserved. Jim put the trophy in the middle of the table as a centerpiece, and we all laughed at the interested glances of the people at nearby tables. Mr. Morgan was coming toward the table and he stopped at my chair. I looked up and smiled. "We'll all take steak dinners."

"Ann," he said, "I'm sorry, but I don't allow Negroes to eat in my restaurant."

Suddenly the room was ten degrees warmer. "But Mr. Morgan," I said, "Jim's a debater. He's with our party. Besides, I've seen Negroes in here before."

"I know," Mr. Morgan uncomfortably ran his finger around his collar, "but I've made a new ruling. We had a little trouble. And now—well—I—can't make exceptions."

"If Jim goes we all go," I said firmly.

Mr. Morgan was mentally adding the prices of eight steak dinners. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Ann. Surely we could work something out."

We went out of the restaurant and stopped on the sidewalk. I was biting my tongue so hard tears came to my eyes.

Jim turned toward me and said, "Ann, why don't the rest of you eat here? I can go somewhere else."

"We will not. You're one of us, Jim, and we're all going to eat together. There's a little place down the street where we can go." I knew they would let Jim eat there. We started slowly down the street—a silent group of people.

We walked along in silence for almost half a block. Everyone avoided meeting his neighbor's eye. Finally, Bob tried to regain the former lighthearted air. "Hey, Jim, it's your turn to carry our loot."

Jim glanced up and his right eyelid twitched several times before he said slowly, "No Bob, you carry it the rest of the way."