

## **Tales of True Debate Adventure: “Bronx XXIII”**

They were battered and bruised as they lined up for the security check. The competition they had completed earlier that day had not been an easy one. Some of them had done very well, some had fared a little less well, but every one of them had given their all in the battle. And now it was over. The Bronx team—twenty-one students, one policy coach and one director of forensics—was ready to go home.

“We’re a high school group,” Director Cruz said in a tired voice.

The uniformed TSA worker studied the group through narrowed eyes. “What school?”

“Bronx High School of Science.”

The TSA worker nodded her head. “Never heard of it.”

This was the first time Cruz had ever heard those words.

“Any of them Americans?” she continued.

“Excuse me?”

“Are any of them Americans? Citizens, you know? Red-blooded Americanos.”

“They all are.”

“They sure don’t look it to me.” She scrutinized them again. “Don’t you have any Protestants on your team?”

One by one boarding passes were double-checked against the minimal identification papers of the minors who uniformly possessed no driver’s licenses or other traditional issues of governmental authority.

“This is a membership in the school bowling league,” the TSA worker said to one student. “That’s not an i.d.”

“That’s our school’s official sport,” the student replied.

“What’s your average?” the woman asked, as if it were a trick question, because how could this brownish adolescent ever be a serious bowler.

“One sixty-eight.”

Her eyes widened, and she handed him back his i.d. and boarding pass. “You’re in,” she said.

It took fifteen minutes for the Bronx team to work their way through security. They were interrogated, patted down, x-rayed, sprayed and dusted, but none of them, not the most Muslim Muslim, not the most Hindu Hindu, not the most Chinese Chinese, triggered any real alarms.

They were in.

Once they had put their shoes back on, packed up their computers (those who had computers, that is—Director Cruz had started his morning with the discovery that his computer had apparently been stolen by Mafia operatives seeking the skinny on the team’s plan for global domination via its so-called Big Bronx tournament, plans that in fact did exist, but which Cruz kept hidden on a separate disk under his permanent table at the restaurant code-named Japonica), and grabbed their backpacks and carry-ons, they headed toward the tram to the terminal. Ten minutes later they were gathered at the gate, ready for their flight home.

“Fancy meeting you here,” the Old Philosopher said, ambling over to join the team from his previous post on a nearby bar stool.

“Look,” Mr. Cruz said, “it’s the Old Philosopher. Everybody say hello to the Old Philosopher.”

“Hello, Old Philosopher,” the team muttered excitedly.

The Old Philosopher represented a different team from Bronx, a team that had not traveled with him to this tournament. He was on his own this weekend, a maverick, for reasons only he could understand, although it was unlikely that he actually did. And he was booked on the same flight home as the Bronx XXIII.

Everyone settled into their seats, waiting to board flight 194 to JFK. Computers were extracted by those who still possessed them, phones were drawn out for texting, notes were consulted in preparation for the tests that faced many of the students on the morrow. Not far from where they were sitting, slot machines glistened and gleamed, occasionally ringing and buzzing, attempting to pull in passers-by for one more shot at financial independence. Announcements of flights arriving and passengers needing to present themselves and warnings not to allow someone else to pack your bags (as if someone else trying to pack your bag wouldn’t already have raised your suspicions without such a warning) were occasionally broadcast over the loudspeakers.

It was the typical wait for a flight.

194 to JFK was scheduled to depart at 2:05 p.m. At 1:30 p.m. the boarding was announced. First the muck-a-mucks who could afford an extra fifty bucks for an extra inch of legroom boarded, followed by the new parents with their bawling infants, followed by the lame and the halt needing extra time to find their seats and park their crutches and walkers, and finally the hoi and the polloi came on, working from the rear of the plane to the front. The Bronx XXIII were scattered around the plane. The Old Philosopher was in the midst of them, warning a former champion of the people sitting in front of him that if he even thought of reclining his

seatback, the Old Philosopher would order his execution immediately on their return home. Flight attendants bustled about, stowing bags and advising passengers that the flight was so full that they'd have to use the overhead racks in an officially approved manner, with the butts facing out, to make room for them all. At the door to the crew cabin, a fussy looking gentleman in a white shirt with blue epaulets was holding a clipboard and talking to the flight crew.

The time to close the cabin door and batten down the hatches was rapidly approaching.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Solo speaking." He had the traditional Chuck Yaeger drawl of the professional pilot. "We are waiting for the okay from the ground maintenance crew, and then we'll be on our way."

All systems, in other words, were go.

Fifteen minutes later: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Solo again. We have a slight delay while the ground maintenance crew checks our starboard engine, and then we'll be on our way."

Whatever.

Fifteen minutes later: "Ladies and gentlemen, there's a slight crack in one of the blades on the starboard engine. As soon as the ground maintenance crew files it down, we'll be on our way."

Hmmmm.

Fifteen minutes later: "Ladies and gentleman, the ground maintenance crew doesn't necessarily believe that filing down the cracked blade will do the job, and the last thing we want is for the engine to seize and explode in midair, which never comes out well in the end, so we're going to exit the aircraft while we still can. Please do not panic. As soon as the ground maintenance crew solves the problem, we'll be in the air in no time. And then you can panic."

This was not what the passengers wanted to hear. The Old Philosopher had an important meeting the next day at which nothing good would happen, but at which his absence would be duly noted. He needed to leave soon. As for the Bronx XXIII, those of them who had tests began to imagine arriving later and later, going directly from the airport to the test room. Director Cruz had his own issues of meeting the next day; the last thing he wanted was to proceed directly from the airport to the classroom without a shower, a shave, and whatever else starts with the letters s h. Not to mention deodorant and foot spray.

Grabbing their belongings, from the backpacks to the butts-out overhead bags, the passengers filed out of the plane, past the flight

attendants and the fussy looking gentleman in the white shirt with the blue epaulets and the clipboard. Once again they were sitting at the gate, waiting.

“There’s a man in the engine,” the Old Philosopher said, pointing out the window,

Director Cruz looked out. “He’s going to get sucked in.”

“The blood will scatter all across this window.”

“Shades of Indiana Jones!”

“Ooh, ooh,” twenty-one debaters said, looking at the window, waiting for the blood. The policy debate coach, used to seeing blood on the windows, slumped into his chair and closed his eyes.

“How long do you think we’ll have to wait?” Director Cruz asked.

The Old Philosopher shook his head. “Nobody knows.” He pulled out his Kindle and took up where he had left off reading a ~~James Bond~~ novel Proust, the students pulled out their computers and test papers again, and Director Cruz pulled out his iPhone and fired up Foursquare. This was the second time today he was checking into the airport, but it wasn’t enough to make him the mayor. He did earn the Jerking Around in the Airport Badge, however.

Time passed, and so did the Mexican food from the night before. Every fifteen minutes or so, as passengers pressured the desk for information, the desk announced that they had nothing to announce. More time passed, and as passengers continued to pressure the desk for information, the desk announced that their supervisor was looking into things and would announce something shortly. By now, everyone realized that the flight, if it took off at all, would arrive at around 2:00 a.m. Time enough for the Bronx’s and the Old Philosopher’s school and meetings, but not happily.

After two hours, the announcement came. “Ladies and gentlemen, due to equipment problems and our airline’s desire to fly you all the way to your destination rather than turning into a fireball somewhere over the Midwest, we are cancelling flight number 194.”

A cheer arose from the Bronx XXIII—no tests! The rest of the passengers immediately turned on them. It was a scene William Golding had left out of *Lord of the Flies*.

“We will not be able to provide substitute equipment today,” the announcement went on. “Would the passengers please line up at one of the two desks for alternate arrangements?”

Director Cruz and the Old Philosopher went to stand on one of the lines, which moved with a speed that would make the Rock of Gibraltar look

fast. Some of the passengers died of advancing old age even as the rest stood there, wondering what could possibly take so long.

“We understand we have a school party of twenty-three,” came an announcement. “We have made special arrangements for you. Would the leader of the group please step forward?”

Director Cruz, grinning the grin of the privileged, moved out of the line, and a special attendant came and took him over to the side.

The Old Professor remained on the line, getting considerably older in the process. Finally, he made it to the front.

“We have a flight for you tomorrow at 8:30,” the clerk told him. “We’ll put you up in a hotel tonight. Here’s your vouchers and your boarding pass. See you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” the Old Philosopher said, taking his documents. After looking at his watch—it was about 4:30—he walked over to Director Cruz and explained his situation.

“They’ve got us on a ten o’clock flight tonight,” Cruz told him. “Special treatment because of the kids and everything. So we’ll be getting there before you. But that also means we really will be going directly from the plane to the classroom. I’ve explained everything on the phone to the principal. She said that we all could have a day off to make up for the discomfort. Unfortunately, she said we could have the day off in July.”

“Well, have a good trip,” the Old Philosopher said, and he picked up his bag and headed out to the city of Las Vegas. Again.

The Old Philosopher walked from his hotel, which was off the Strip, a place to sleep but not to play, to the main drag. The hotel New York, New York was the closest, and that was his target. Passing a few poor souls lounging on the side of the street with bottles inside their brown paper wrappers, and a woman in a fairy suit carrying what looked like a didgeridoo, he decided that he’d take a cab for the return trip after dark. After about fifteen minutes the O.P. made it to the casino. His first stop was a gift shop, where he purchased a new shirt for nine dollars, because he had run out of fresh laundry aside from unmentionables, which he habitually overpacked, for reasons he didn’t understand until now, when those extra socks were paying off. Armed with his new shirt, he took a tour of the main floor of the casino, reading menu after menu. Irish pub food? Japanese? Chinese? And then he saw the Italian restaurant. Nice. Classy. With seats outside, where he could watch the passing parade. This was the one.

After ordering a balsamic mixed green salad, pasta Bolognese, and a glass of the headier of the two red wine specials of the day, he pulled out his iPhone and texted a picture of his surroundings to Director Cruz. "Italian food at NYNY. I win," he typed.

Shortly thereafter he received a response. It was a picture of Hudson News, with the words, "I lose."

The O.P. sipped his wine with pleasure. It was a disappointing day in some respects, but it could have been worse.

He could have been part of the Bronx XXIII.

The flight was scheduled for 10:20 p.m. It was now 9:55. The Bronx XXIII had spent the last six hours of airport existence playing cards, walking the length of the terminal, texting, walking the length of the terminal, eating fast food, walking the length of the terminal, napping, walking the length of the terminal, going to the bathroom, walking the length of the terminal, playing Words with Friends, walking the length of the terminal, playing Words with Marginal Acquaintances, walking the length of the terminal, playing Words with People You Don't Know and You Don't Want to Know, and, occasionally, walking the length of the terminal.

"Could Director Cruz please report to gate D14?" the announcement came over the loudspeaker.

Director Cruz, who was reading the collected letters of Walter Mondale, again, rose from his seat and went to the desk, where a young man in an a white shirt with blue epaulets and a clipboard, which was apparently the airline's uniform for bureaucrats, greeted him with the words, "I'm afraid there's a little problem, Mr. Cruz."

Cruz looked at him. A little problem? They'd already been at the airport nearly ten hours, and aside from walking the length of the terminal, had never ventured ten feet away from the desk. They had been on a plane and bumped off it. They'd been told they'd arrive in time tomorrow morning to pour themselves directly into the school without even time to splash their faces with cold water. And now there was a little problem?

"The thing is," the agent continued, "we don't exactly have you booked on tonight's flight."

"Not exactly?" Cruz echoed.

"Well, the thing is, we have you booked on a flight on April 23."

Cruz looked at his watch. Today's date was April 17. "Could you run that by me again?"

“You’re not on tonight’s flight. We mistakenly booked you for next Monday.” The agent gave a slight smile. “But we’ll do whatever we can to correct the situation. Don’t forget, our motto is, ‘We’re not happy unless you’re not happy.’”

What happened next can only be explained as DEFCON 1. In the language of national defense, there are five conditions. The normal, blue, condition, is DEFCON 5, or “fade out.” If things get a little dicey, DEFCON 2, color green, is referred to as “double take.” The planes start rolling down the runways and the ICBMs are revved up and the boomer subs start swimming into position at DEFCON 3, yellow alert, “round house.” At this point the president is on the phone to Moscow, London, Tel Aviv and Beijing, not to mention Domino’s. The next step to nuclear war is “fast pace,” DEFCON 2, red alert. The final color is white, the code name is “cocked pistol,” and the situation is imminent nuclear war. This is DEFCON 1.

Director Cruz was at DEFCON 1. White. Cocked pistol. Imminent nuclear war.

“You can’t do this to us,” Cruz screamed. “We’re from Bronx Science!”

The agent shook his head. “Never heard of it.”

As the steam flew out his ears, Director Cruz took his most extreme measure. “You can’t do this to us. I have an Emory key!” He ripped open his shirt to reveal the gold key hanging down his neck and, also, his rippling muscles and Situation-like abs.

This time the agent was prepared, and ripped open his own shirt. “Well,” he shouted back, “I have an Emory key too, bub! You think you’re the only person in the world who ever woke up in Atlanta with a hangover and a dead body in the bed next to you?”

Because this story is intended for general audiences, we will leave the rest of this scene to the reader’s imagination.

It was after midnight when the first of the six taxis bearing the Bronx XXIII arrived at the hotel back in Las Vegas. It was the same hotel the Old Philosopher was staying in, but he had been sound asleep for hours now. Director Cruz, bearing a fistful of vouchers, slowly crawled toward the desk. Whatever energy he might have had had been drained away long ago.

“The airline sent us,” he managed to croak, dropping the pile of vouchers on the desk.

The woman behind the counter looked at Cruz, and at the parade of Bronx students stumbling in behind him. "How many rooms do you need?" she asked.

"How many have you got?"

She started counting. "You're going to have to double up a bit," she said.

"I'd sleep with Attila the Hutt at this point," Cruz replied.

The woman started typing, and passed some papers across to Cruz. "Just fill in your information there," she said.

Cruz picked up the desk pen and started writing.

"So what school are you from?" the woman asked.

"Bronx Science," Cruz replied.

The woman shook her head. "Never heard of it."

The Old Philosopher was sipping his mimosa and nibbling at the crumbs of his croissant when the Bronx XXIII began pouring back into the terminal. It was a beautiful spring morning, and the O.P. had been reading the Times on his iPad, and all was well with the world. His flight this morning was unlisted on the Departure Board, but a quick check online had shown that the flight was happening; it was the new equipment flown in to replace last night's plane. In fact, the plane was already at the gate, waiting for the time to welcome its passengers. The O.P.'s boarding pass had him in row one, with enough leg room to satisfy the Bolshoi Ballet.

As they arrived, the Bronx XXIII looked, in a word, disheveled. The only one who seemed to be wearing anything different from the previous night was the policy coach in a Siegfried and Roy tee shirt prominently featuring the tiger that ate poor Roy (or was it poor Siegfried?). The team's funk was both spiritual and palpable, and grown men stepped aside to let them pass. Once again they found their seats by the gate, the same seats that they had had the previous night.

"Welcome back," the O.P. said to Director Cruz.

"Good morning," Cruz whimpered manfully.

"Rough night?"

There was a momentary glimpse of double take, AKA color green, AKA DEFCON 2 in Cruz's eyes, but it quickly subsided. "Don't ask."

"I don't have to ask," the O.P. replied. "You posted every last molecule of it on Facebook. I feel as if I was there."

"And you spent the night dallying on the Strip?"



The O.P. smiled, but added nothing. No point in rubbing it in, after all.

After a half an hour of collecting breakfasts and texting and, occasionally, walking the length of the terminal, the passengers, all refugees from the cancelled flight the previous day, were invited to board the aircraft.

The parade, hopefully the last parade, began. One by one the passengers picked up their gear, handed in their boarding passes, and found their seats.

Up front in the cockpit, there was no employee in white shirt and blue epaulets. There were no visible clipboards. The crew was busy preparing for takeoff.

And then the pilot stood and came out to the front of the cabin. He was a handsome African-American, with a vague resemblance to Barack Obama. The Democrats on the plane were strangely reassured. The Republicans were strangely disquieted.

“I want to just say one thing,” the pilot said, making a most uncharacteristic in-person announcement down the length of the cabin. “I want to apologize to all of you for any inconvenience last night may have caused. I promise you a good flight today to make up for it.” He paused. “And I understand we have a student group on board today from Bronx Science.” His eyes scanned the cabin. “Bronx Science,” he repeated, nodding. “Amazing.” He paused again. “I never heard of it.”

A minute later he was back in his seat, and the plane was pulling away from the gate.

The odyssey of Bronx XXIII had come to its conclusion.