



Episode 18

Sylvia? Who is She?

It is one of those early autumn days when the weather is absolutely perfect. It is exactly room temperature both indoors and out, without a cloud or even the slightest breeze, and you wonder why it's not summer anymore, but mostly you don't care, because any day as fine as this can be any time of year it wants.

Most of the students at Veil of Ignorance Catholic High School have gone home by now. The buses pulled out of the parking lot at their regular time like a herd of yellow elephants instinctively heading for their secret burial ground. Their passengers are now almost without exception not doing their homework, but instead staring out of windows or tossing footballs or Frisbees or sitting outside soaking in the last of the year's sun. But a few kids remained at the school, and they too are enjoying the weather. In various ways.

The football team -- the Mighty Veilers -- are on the field, repeating the same drill over and over: they stand twenty feet apart, half the team facing the other half, and at the count of three from their coach they all rush forward and jump on each other. After two or three minutes of extracting themselves from the ensuing pile-up, they repeat the process. One, two, three: Whooooosh! Thump! Clunk! Thud! Pffft.

Again. One, two three: Whooooosh! Thump! Clunk! Thud! Pffft.

"Here's your sandwich, Seth."

Seth B. Obomash is stretched out across three rows of the bleachers, idly watching the practice. Tara Petskin, his star debater, is holding out a brown paper bag. He straightens himself and grabs it from her.

"Thanks," he says, extracting a ham and cheese submarine sandwich the size of a Chihuahua and greedily biting into it before he has the wrapper off by more than an inch. "How much do I owe you?"

"Four fifty. I got you a cream soda, too."

"Perfect," he says, his mouth full. He reaches into his pocket with his left hand while his right hands continues with the sandwich, draws out a small wad of money and hands a five dollar bill to her. "Keep the change."

"Of course."

She sits down next to him.

"Where are they?" she asks.

"They should be out in a minute. They're putting on their uniforms, some of them for the first time. It's a big moment."

"A big moment." She shakes her head. "I remember it well," she says, not masking her cynicism.

"You want me to believe you didn't like it?" Seth asks her.

"Let's just say that the irony of the moment did not escape me."

"Give me a break. You were a natural."

"I still am, Seth."

"You still are indeed, Tara."

Tara Petskin, on first glance, is primarily a pair of glasses, which seem to cover every part of her face that isn't hidden by her long auburn hair. But this is not to say that she is unattractive; far from it. She brings more to a pair of glasses than most girls bring to a Wonderbra-stuffed fifteen-hundred-dollar prom dress. Seventeen years old, she is a girl of maturity beyond most of the students Seth has ever known, and he is the sort of coach to notice such things. Not that he would even express even the slightest un-coachlike interest in any of his students, or anyone else's students, but that doesn't preclude him from appreciating the obvious. But what's more important to him in Tara's case is her debater's brain, from which he wishes he could scrape a few shavings into his private cloning kit to keep one or two a year just like her available for his team. He has never seen anything like her in his life, from his own career as a high school debater up through now as a coach, and he doubts if he'll ever see her like again. And she is a senior this year, which means that it will be coming to an end, but there's still plenty of glory ahead of her. She and her partner have already won the Reconstruction Memorial, and this year that is only going to be the beginning.

Speaking of her partner, "Where's Bill?" Seth asks.

"Working on the Clinton disad."

"Good. You need to be on top of that."

"We probably can work it against anybody running Navahos or marijuana. Fab and Kush might be running a po-mo critique, by the way; at least they're talking about it."

"You beat their asses at Johnson on neg, you can beat them if they're aff, I don't care how post-modern they get."

Tara shrugs. "They've been getting evidence from Lisa Torte."

"Po-mo incarnate!" Seth wipes a dab of mustard from his upper lip. "Why is she helping them, of all people? Lodestone doesn't have its own teams all of a sudden?"

"Mr. Lo Pat won't let her go near his policy team."

Seth chuckles, then licks his right index finger. "I'm not surprised."

"I've got an idea," Tara says. "Not a serious idea, but something we can use against lame-os in early rounds."

"What?"

"Alligators."

Every year policy debate addresses one topic for the entire season, unlike LD which changes every few months, and sometimes has a topic only for one tournament. This year the policy topic is: The United States should substantially change its immigration laws.

"Alligators?" Seth repeats, trying to assess the potential angle.

"Alligators." Tara pushes her glasses up higher on her nose. "Okay. You have an indeterminate number of giant albino alligators roaming the sewers of New York. Right? The ones that grow from three inch babies that people bring back as souvenirs of Florida and then toss down the toilets?"

"Maybe," Seth says cautiously.

"I've got evidence."

"You do?"

"Solid stuff, topical, New York Times two months ago."

He raises an eyebrow. "I must have missed that."

"So follow this," Tara says, ignoring his irony. "The only defense against these vicious predators is trained policemen capable of jungle warfare. If immigration is up, crime in the streets is up. The sewer cops are forced to climb up from the underground and arrest the immigrants who are committing all the crimes. The alligators multiply. New York City topples as a result. Including the financial markets. Panic ensues. The U.S. President has to cover his ass to maintain his popularity, so he deep sixes NAFTA and cuts off trade with Mexico, which destroys their economy. Mexico declares war on the U.S. in retaliation. The U.S. President nukes them. Q.e.d."

Seth B. Obomash pushes the last of his sandwich into his mouth. "It could work," he says, "but only against certain competition."

"Right. Lame-os."

Seth nods. "Lame-os," he agrees. "And you couldn't run it more than once or twice. I mean, there really aren't any giant albino alligators living in the New York sewers. That's a myth."

"It's not a myth, it's a legend."

"What's the difference?" Seth knows she'll have a good answer.

"My intelligence is a legend. Yours is a myth." She smiles.

"Not bad."

"I know."

"But there still really aren't any giant albino alligators."

"I'll cross that reptile when I come to it. And speaking of reptiles..."

A pack of black-outfitted students is approaching the stands where Seth and Tara are sitting. Each is wearing black Nikes and sweatpants, and a T-shirt that reads, "Policy Rules."

"Black Nikes?" Tara asks.

"I want to keep them topical," Seth replies.

The students, representing the entire Veil of Ignorance policy team, except for Bill O'Connor working in the library and his partner Tara Petskin schmoozing with the coach, come to a halt at the foot of the grandstand. Most of them are freshmen; all debaters at Veil start out in policy. If they wish to switch to LD, they can do so as sophomores, but not, as Obomash points out regularly, until they know some of the true principles of argumentation. When Seth was a high school debater, policy was all there was. Policy -- evidence, team work, classic debating -- LD is no comparison. If students want to do LD, he won't stop them, but he won't start them either.

Seth stares down on them ominously. He is physically prepossessing enough that ominous is never a stretch for him.

"We're here, Mr. Obomash," one of the students volunteers.

"So I see," he responds. "You all know the poem?" he asks.

There are a few nods here and there. In the background, the football team is still at it. One, two three: Whooooosh! Thump! Clunk! Thud! Pffft.

"I said, you all know the poem?" He volume rises and he sounds like a marine drill instructor.

"Yes, sir," they reply, like marine recruits.

"Let's hear it."

They speak in one voice.

"Who is Policy, what is she, that all our swains commend her? Holy, fair, and wise is she, that heaven such grace did lend her." Pause. "Sir!"

Seth looks up and down their ranks. "Policy rules," he says softly. "But only from policy rulers. You've got to be strong. Tough. You've got to have stamina. And you've got to talk fast." He turns to Tara. "If you would be so kind..."

She takes a breath. "Who is policy, what is she, that all our swains commend her, holy, fair, and wise is she, that heaven such grace did lend her." She shows no effort. "Sir," she adds.

"When you can talk as quickly and as clearly as Tara, you'll be policy rulers. Like she is. Then you'll have earned those T-shirts. For now, I want you to do laps."

"How many, Mr. Obomash?"

He eyes the speaker closely. He likes it when one of them has the nerve to speak up this early in the curriculum. "As many as you can, freshman. And while you're running them, you'll recite the poem. As fast as you can. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then start running."

And they're off. They're about twenty yards away when Seth yells after them: "The poem!"

As they jog along, the distorted sounds of the poem come from them in fits and starts.

"They talk slower than they run," Tara says.

"They'll get better. I'll ream them out when they come by again. I always did like that poem. It's so sibilant, it's almost impossible to say fast. But if you can say that, you can say anything."

The sound of "Who is policy, what is she" in disjointed spurts blends with the Whoooooosh-Thump-Clunk-Thud-Pfffts of the football team, the mix and match of sporting sounds on an autumn afternoon at Veil of Ignorance Catholic High School.

"You ready for Messerschmitt?" Seth asks his star debater.

"Ready to kick ass," she replies.

Seth smiles. It's going to be a great year. There is only one cloud on the horizon: "You didn't get any chips with this sandwich, did you?"

Will Tara Petskin keep up her winning streak?

With Seth B. Obomash find some chips?

Will the Veil of Ignorance policy team learn to talk fast and run at the same time?

Will policy continue to rule?

Will "X Men 4" be nothing more than a rehash of "Deuce Bigelow"?

This, that, and a few other items will be summarily dismissed in our next installment: "Creamed Spinach: Vital Vittles or Urologist's Nightmare ?"