



## Episode 21

### Do You Like Miami, Dear? Kindly Tell Me if So

There must be an hour of the day, maybe two o'clock in the morning, or maybe three o'clock, but certainly no later than sunrise, when a sense of sleepiness pervades New York's Kennedy airport, when a plane isn't always threatening to clip your cowlick, when taxicabs and jitneys are not careering along semiprivate byways in all directions at once, when families of forty-six members bridging nine generations speaking no known human language are not portaging warehouse loads of color television sets from the long-term parking lot to the ticket line directly in front of you. Some time, during the night, this great metropolitan airport must slip into dormancy, but few people have ever seen it, and most doubt if it even exists.

At seven o'clock in the morning, stepping down off the Toulouse Lautrec bus, Had Fleece is definitely one of the doubters.

People are coming and going in every direction, on foot, on rollers, on taxis and on motorcycles. All of them have luggage the size of Portugal that they'll surreptitiously try to carry on to their planes. The school bus has had to park in the middle of the access road, as close as it could get to the entrance door due to the double-, triple-, and occasionally quadruple-parking of the other arriving vehicles. Everywhere on the terminal building are signs advertising Delta Airlines. There's Delta on the windows, Delta on the baggage carts, Delta on the hats and jackets of the purposeful staff tying destination tags onto everything that isn't nailed down. Nowhere, to Had's dismay, is there any indication that this might also be the site of Okeechobee Air.

"Go in and ask," Dan Ryan calls down to Had from the top of the stairwell within the bus. "And hustle!"

Had hustles. He walks up to the nearest Delta employee and asks, "Okeechobee Air?"

A sudden look of fright crosses the agent's face, but he recovers quickly. He is a big man with a large belly underneath his wrinkled white Delta shirt. He slowly raises a finger and points along the sidewalk to the right. "That way," he says in a low, rumbling voice, then he quickly turns away, so as not, perhaps, to be tarred by the Okeechobee brush.

Shades of teen splatter, Had thinks, as he jogs in the indicated direction. He is trying to make out some indication of his goal inside the glass walls of the terminal, when suddenly he sees a small sign about a foot square, handwritten with a felt marker pen.

OKEECHOBEE AR. Not AIR. AR.

It's a sign, but it is not a hopeful sign. There is a small door to the left of the sign, at which a cadaverous old black man in an orange suit with a decorous "OA" and a winking parrot with jet pods under its wings embroidered over his breast pocket is leaning against the wall, torn between doing his job and breathing his last breath on this earth.

Had pivots and waves back at the bus, which jerks forward and pulls up next to him. He reboards.

"This is it," Had says. "I think."

Dan Ryan, who is standing next to the bus driver, addresses the team. "Stay together!" he orders them. "From the minute we get off this bus to the time we taxi down the runway, I want to see one twelve-legged debate animal. Do you understand?"

At seven in the morning the replies from the assorted teenagers draped over the seats in various stages of consciousness are dim but affirmative enough.

"Then let's rock and roll!" Ryan says.

The Toulouse Lautrecians heading for the Messerschmitt tournament comprise four LDers and four policy teams. Dan Ryan is partial to policy but he is willing to humor Lincoln-Douglas as a viable alternative for the loose cannons for which he can't find partners, or the occasional individual who simply defies pairing. His willingness at the moment is enhanced by having a Master of the Debate Universe like Had Fleece on the team. No activity is so undesirable that winning at it doesn't dramatically enhance its appeal, and Ryan, a long-time, old-time coach, comes from the school that likes winning.

But Dan Ryan does draw the line. He does have his standards. And as a result, he does not promote speech activities. There are just so many hours in the day. Speech is not his forte and no one expects it of him, and he is not one to destroy peoples' expectations, or lack thereof. He can go on at great length about the perils of speech, the vacuousness, the negative profundity that sucks meaning from the rest of the universe, but few people ever bother to ask. They know a Policy Junkie when they see one.

Outside the bus, Had has opened the luggage area, and the policemen are extracting their evidence coffins. One by one they pile the plastic boxes on top of each other until they've created a veritable Rubbermaid Stonehenge. The old attendant watches without registering a reaction, and without moving the slightest muscle. Only after twenty tubs, four moving dollies, fourteen suitcases, twelve backpacks, seven briefcases and a stuffed monkey -- the team mascot -- have been loaded onto the sidewalk, and Dan Ryan starts walking toward him, does the old man finally respond.

"You folks flying Okeechobee?" he asks, although it's a bit late to tell them that they may have arrived at the wrong place, since the bus is now pulling away into the random

billiards game of oncoming airport traffic.

Ryan extracts an invoice from his pocket. "Ticketless passage to Miami," he says confidently.

The attendant takes the invoice and stares at it curiously, as if he's never seen such an animal before. He looks up to count heads, then looks back at the invoice. His eyes shoot over to the luggage momentarily -- a brow lifting as he contemplates the stacks of evidence tubs -- then back to the invoice again. Finally he shrugs. "Bring it on inside," he says.

"What about the luggage?" Ryan asks.

"Better bring that too. If you want to take it to Miami with you, that is."

"Everything's all right, then?"

"You'll have to check on the desk?"

Ryan's eyes narrow. "Then what are you doing here?" he asks.

The man shrugs again. "Just taking my break," he says with the suggestion of a smile, handing Ryan the invoice and turning to walk into the terminal.

Ryan is speechless as the old man disappears into the building. Then he collects himself.

"Head `em up and move `em out," he orders, pointing inside.

The team heads `em up and moves `em out.

Had is the first to enter the terminal. He immediately recognizes an army of forensic confederates in groups ranging from two or three to more than a dozen. There are kids from Farnsworth, Veil, Lodestone, some he knows well, some he knows by only sight, others he simply assumes are forensicians by the cuts of their jibs. They all have luggage, and additionally many of them have tall piles of evidence tubs. They are all on the ticket line, on which he can see virtually every coach from the district acting as punctuation between the sentences of their students. They stand half-bored and half-anxious, all of them with invoices, none of them with tickets. There is one Okeechobee Air attendant checking them in, a harried looking woman in an orange suit, also with the "OA" and the winking Okeechobee parrot with the jet pods under its wings. Occasionally someone throws a tub on the conveyor belt.

As the Toulouse team pours in through the revolving doors of the terminal, Had hears a familiar sound, a low rumbling whirr punctuated by clicks and clacks. It is the first time he's heard it this year.

It is the sound of Mr. Lo Pat, the head coach of Manhattan Lodestone.

Mr. Lo Pat -- never Mr. Pat, never Lo, never Lo Pat, always Mr. Lo Pat -- is riding his wheelchair directly at Had. Known variously as the Bionic Coach, the Forensic Android, and other similarly unflattering nicknames, Mr. Lo Pat lost the use of most of his body in an accident during the Eisenhower Administration, when he was just beginning his work at Lodestone. But while his legs might be worthless appendages, and only one of his hands is under his full control, and his neck and head are permanently tilted to the left, his brain is one of the most powerful debating weapons ever developed. His ethnic background is unclear, and can variously be guessed as Chinese or Korean or Thai or Vietnamese, but when asked, he merely says Asian, and no one ever presses him on it.

Because Mr. Lo Pat is not a man to be pressed.

"Where is Mr. Ryan?" he asks Had without preamble as his wheelchair pulls to a sudden halt.

"Right behind me," Had answers, flustered. Mr. Lo Pat has a way of flustering people.

The wheelchair whirrs and clicks and rolls a few feet backward as the Toulouse team passes, then jumps off the starting line and races directly toward Dan Ryan as he is the last to come through the revolving door.

"You've got your invoice?" Mr. Lo Pat asks, again without greeting.

"I don't like this no-ticket business," Ryan replies, showing Mr. Lo Pat his invoice.

"At these prices, what's to dislike?" Mr. Lo Pat's right index finger points out from its position on the arm of the wheelchair. "You'll have to get on line to check in."

"What about the kids?"

"Them too. To check in the luggage and the tubs. But say they're all under eighteen. Otherwise you'll be here forever checking driver's licenses."

"Is the flight on time?"

Mr. Lo Pat's head dips slightly further left, the best approximation of a shrug of which he is capable. "Close. So far." He smiles. "At these prices..."

Dan Ryan nods and heads to the line. "Everybody follow me," he says to his team in general as he joins the end of the line, right behind Seth B. Obomash, who was at the end prior to Ryan's arrival. Obomash is holding his invoice in his left hand and a bagel in his right hand. All the other coaches are holding their invoices in their left hands as well, but not all of their right hands are similarly bagelled. Interspersed among the coaches and their teams are an occasional non-forensician, trying to make sense of all the teenagers,

the tubs, and the invoice-bearing adults. The non-forensicians are all carrying tickets.

"Had."

The voice is honey-soft, low and feline. Had turns, and there is Cartier Diamond, with her blazing violet eyes looking directly into his. She opens her arms to hug him. He offers no resistance. In fact, he offers quite the contrary.

"Hi," he finally says as they pull apart.

"I thought you'd never get here," she says. Once again she is dressed entirely in black, from boots to jeans to shirt to jacket. A shiny bracelet hangs around her neck, as sparkly as her name.

"We got off to a late start because the bus didn't show up on time."

"Ryan probably loved that!"

"He went ballistic, as usual. Until the bus driver arrived. Then he didn't say a word."

She smiles as she entwines the fingers of her right hand around the fingers of his left hand. "Typical," she says.

"Typical," he agrees. He nods toward the line ahead of them. His team has now taken its place with their coach. "It looks like all the usual suspects are here."

"Tell me about it," she says. "There's a lot of tough competition, in every activity, from Dec to Policy and back again."

"Where's your guys?" Had asks.

"They're down at the gate. We were like the first ones here this morning. Aside from Mr. Lo Pat."

This time Had smiles. "Typical," he says. "Typical Jutmoll."

"The man hasn't been late a minute in his life. Want to walk down there?"

"I've got to get on line."

A frown crosses her face. She leans in against him. "I wish you could stay with me."

"I'd like that," he says.

"I thought you would."

And so they stand there, body to body, until Dan Ryan's voice cuts over to them.

"Had! Get over here."

They pull away, as if caught in some sinful act.

"I'll see you down at the gate?" Cartier asks.

"Down at the gate," Had replies. He grabs his suitcase and hustles over to join his team.

He watches as Cartier slowly walks away toward the boarding area. She seems to emit sparks as she moves.

Had can't wait to get down at the gate.

**Will Had and Cartier spend the entire tournament together?**

**Will Dan Ryan ever make it to the front of the line?**

**Will the Okeechobee Air -- or is it Ar? -- be this year's Jet Blue?**

**Will carry-on luggage go the way of the hula hoop?**

**Will reality TV ever be replaced by simulacrum TV?**

**Many ask, but few find out, in our next installment: "Chowder: Opium of the People, or Downfall of Vice President Cheney?"**