



Episode 22

Beware the Jabberwock, My Son

David Brillig -- who had, for a short period of time, considered changing his first name to Twas -- was not exactly sure that the plane he was on would crash, but it would not surprise him in the least if it did. An Okeechobee Air Boeing 737? I mean, like, give me a break. Maybe the tickets were only costing something around twenty-seven dollars a head, but once in a while schools had to measure the monetary cost of running a debate team against the emotional cost of losing that team in one fell aeronautical swoop. And what plane would be more likely to swoop than an Okeechobee Air Boeing 737? Especially one carrying every team between Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Dennis, Massachusetts.

"If this plane goes down," David says, shaking his head, "it will be the end of forensics as we know it in the Northeast."

"If this plane goes down," his Dramatic Interpretation partner, William Hand says, "it wouldn't surprise me in the least. Things like that are always happening to me." He raises his eyes to the top of the cabin overhead, focusing in roughly on the fasten-seat-belt sign. "Why me, Lord?" he pleads. "Why me?"

"We'd all be going down together, William," David points out, "so it wouldn't exactly be happening only to you."

"Well, that makes me feel a whole lot better, now, doesn't it. This is definitely the group I would pick to stand on line at the pearly gates with. Seth B. Obomash? Mr. Lo Pat?" William shudders as he speaks the next name. "Alida Devans? God save me from standing behind Alida Devans on the line to St. Peter. 'You'll have to let me in,' she'll tell him, 'but the little bastard behind me went over by two seconds once in his Duo, so I'm sure you can find a better place for him. Perhaps something a little warmer?'"

David elbows him. "She's sitting right up there. She can hear you."

"She's ten aisles away, and she and Mr. Lo Pat have their foreheads together like long lost Siamese twins."

Which is true. The two coaches are deep in conversation, discussing whatever it is that

coaches say to each other. "Her team is here in force," David says, looking around the cabin. There must be twenty Brooklyn Behemoth students scattered about, representing virtually all the high school forensic activities.

"They go to Messerschmitt in force every year," William says. "They usually sweep it in practically every category."

"Them or Farnsworth."

"Or us, David my child. Or us. We can take it, too, if we're lucky. Every category."

"From your lips to God's hearing aid."

William looks up heavenward again, or at least fasten-seat-belt-sign-ward again. "Hear that, God? We're talking Nighten Day taking a sweepstakes award here. Walkover, big time!"

Although Okeechobee Air Flight 1701D has yet to pull away from the terminal, everyone is seated, and every seat is taken. The flight attendants are consulting with each other at the front of the cabin, occasionally looking back with apprehension at the overwhelmingly young and forensic passenger group they are about to serve. The cockpit door is open, and from the aisle the crew can be seen fussing away at the various controls as if they actually know what they are doing. But if they are actually capable pilots, one has to wonder, what are they doing working for a low-rent airline like Okeechobee Air?

Suddenly, with the usual roars and jerks, the plane begins to back away from the gate, and David settles back in his seat. He is not a happy flier under the best of circumstances, and Okeechobee Air Flight 1701D is hardly the best of circumstances. He gives his seat belt another tug. If it were any tighter, he'd have to remove his spleen. As if being tightly strapped into your seat means anything when the engines give out at thirty thousand feet. He closes his eyes. He has to take his mind off the impending take-off.

But closing his eyes brings him back to his new nightmare, which has nothing to do with the crashing of airplanes. It is the nightmare that has unexpectedly jumped from behind a corner with "Boo" on its lips, and the nightmare that he must confront. And he must confront it soon. His future, and his sanity, are depending on it.

Or was it an unexpected nightmare?

He opens his eyes as the plane starts moving forward, that slow taxiing out to the runway that portends the wrenching horror of lifting umpty-ump tons of steel from the ground into thin air simply because science says it's possible. Since when had David Brillig ever been good at science? For that matter, how many forensicians period were ever good at science? These were verbal gerbils, 800s on the English SATs, 520s on the math, except for the policy kids and a few overachievers from the magnet schools. What if God punished them for their lack of understanding natural law? It could happen. The Bible

was filled with stuff like that.

As if, David thinks, the Bible means all that much. At least not to him. Not now. But it was not always thus.

David is in the middle seat on one side of the aisle, three across on each side, with Jasmine Maru on his left, doing her homework, of all things, and William on his right, listening to the airplane headphones. Female on one side, male on the other. The persistent nightmare, in its simplest terms.

What the hell was he going to do about it?

The plane made a turn, and the captain's voice came over the loudspeaker. The words were garbled, leading David to hope that sound system maintenance was not an indication of the rest of the craft's maintenance history.

"What did he say?" he asks.

"We're next in line to take off," William tells him.

"He said that?"

"He said something like that. But we are next to take off. There was only one plane ahead of us when we turned."

David closes his eyes again. Takeoffs. Most crashes occurred during takeoffs, or if you made it that far, landings. These were the times when the autopilots were off and the potential for human error was at its height.

"Wake me when it's over," he mutters softly.

The engines give a gruff roar in response, and a moment later the plane inches forward. Another roar, and then the plane starts rolling down the runway, faster, faster, every stressed-metal inch of it pressing against fate to once again defy the non-scientist's logic and become airborne.

"We have liftoff," William announces beside him as the nose of the plane stabs upward, pushing David back into his seat.

Let's just hope it stays lifted off, he thinks, his eyes still closed.

And then the worst is over, at least for now. The plane is still climbing, but the angle of ascent is lower, and the captain would right about now be switching off the no-smoking sign, if anyone were allowed to smoke. But David keeps his eyes closed. Maybe he'll fall asleep.

Maybe not.

And in any case, there is still the nightmare to consider.

He can feel William adjusting himself to his right, and his mind wanders to as far back as he can remember, and William was always there, middle school, grammar school, preschool, the neighborhood, even the hospital nursery where they were born a day apart. They might not share a drop of common blood, but they were twins both geographically and chronologically. They even looked alike, right from the beginning. Blue-eyed blondies bawling next to each other in the nursery in their parents' ritualistically identical videotapes. Their mothers had even shared the same maternity room.

And David could hear the voices over the years, always saying the same things.

"They could be brothers."

"They're just like brothers."

"They're better than brothers."

"Two peas in a pod."

"The best of friends. From the day they were born."

The best of friends. The best of friends. The best of friends.

No doubt about it. They were the best of friends. Always had been. Maybe always would be. There was nothing wrong with that, now, was there?

Think about it: What hadn't they shared? They liked the same everything, and always had. And they always had each other, no matter what else happened. They not only had shared experiences, they had shared reactions to those experiences. If one liked a movie, the other liked the movie, if one was allergic to clams, the other was allergic to clams, if one had seen "Singin' in the Rain" a hundred and twenty-seven times, the other had seen "Singin' in the Rain" a hundred and twenty-seven times. Not necessarily, if usually, together, but always the same.

And David hadn't given it a second thought, for many, many years. Until high school. And especially now. Because there were other factors involved. Factors he didn't understand. And factors he had to come to grips with.

Because, no doubt about it, like swallows have wings, like elephants have trunks, like meatballs have cholesterol, like videotapes have late-return charges, William -- his William, the best of his friends -- was gay. There was no doubt about it, and he admitted it freely. Or at least he admitted it freely to David.

Last night. On the telephone.

"I'm gay," he had said.

"Oh," David had replied. What else could he say?

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" William had asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, it should. Think about it."

David had nodded, not that William would see him nod over the phone. "I will think about it," he had said.

And he's thinking about it now. Not that it matters to him one way or the other whether William is gay, or French, or Farsi, or Republican, left-handed, one-legged, three-eyed or snaggle-toothed. What matters to David is, if William is gay, maybe David is gay too.

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"They're just like brothers."

"They're better than brothers."

"Two peas in a pod."

"The best of friends. From the day they were born."

The best of friends. The best of friends. The best of friends.

Or maybe more. Or maybe not.

David, seventeen years old, has never kissed a girl, provided you don't count whatever silliness might have taken place in middle school when everybody seemed to consider themselves steadies and betrothed and very serious, even though it was more gossiped about than real. But, he hastens to add, he has never kissed a boy either. Including not in middle school. He's never even thought about kissing boys, and he has thought about kissing girls. But he has also thought about being a movie star, and a rock star, and being able to fly, and winning the lottery and buying a house all for himself, and none of those things were real either.

What does it mean to be gay? Are you gay because you think you're gay, or because you say you're gay, or are you gay whether you know it or not, and it's just waiting to come out when you least expect it? William hadn't told him this. He had only said those two words: I'm gay.

What the hell did that mean?

"The captain has turned off the seat-belt sign," the flight attendant announces, and then she goes on to say that if you must walk around the cabin you can, but if you have an ounce of sense you won't move an inch and you'll keep your seat-belt so tight that a spleen replacement is a real possibility.

So, David wonders, am I gay too? And if I am, how would I know it? If I'm not, how would I know that?

And therein lies the persistent nightmare. Not the knowing, but the not knowing.

But at least one thing is certain. David and William have to have a talk. A long talk. And they have to have it soon.

Real soon.

Is David Brillig gay?

Should he change his name to Twas?

Is 1701D as obvious a reference as it looks?

Do they teach Nostrum at Institute?

Do I dare to eat a peach?

Isn't it obvious that this was not only written before 9/11, but also before *Snakes on a Plane*?

If you can tear yourself away from the rise and fall of the Red Sox, you'll be wasting your time looking for the answers in our next installment: "Brussels Sprouts: Cruciform blessing or international espionage plot?"