



## Episode 23

### **I Say, Jeeves, Pass the Komodo Steaks, That's a Good Fellow**

Not every debate team flies the friendly skies of Okeechobee Air.

Not every team is savvy enough to pool its resources with Mr. Lo Pat, who has never paid more than one hundred sixty two dollars for any flight in his career, no matter what the distance.

Not every team gets to fly the only American carrier that seats passengers eight across on a Boeing 737 when five would have been a tight squeeze carrying the threat of a morals charge, where the little bags of peanuts cost fifty cents a pop and where complimentary beverages means that they tell you you're good-looking as you pay two bucks for a Coke, and where the flight attendants warily cross themselves out of superstitious fear whenever their backs are turned to the cabin.

Not every team gets the thrill of having a pilot flying on a learner's permit.

But most of them do. That is, most of the Northeasterners, who have a herding instinct like African wildebeests.

Mr. Lo Pat is in the front seat, because of his wheelchair. He faces back toward the cabin, staring grimly at the assembled forensicians. Next to him is his assistant, Lisa Torte, her nose in a copy of Jacques Derrida's "Limited Inc," which is not unexpected for the guru of postmodern debate. Next to her is Seth B. Obomash, sound asleep, his jaws moving slowly in time to whatever culinary dream is entertaining him.

And the role call can continue row after row down the overcrowded aisles. A coach here, a team there, an extemper here, an OOer there. Most of them are in a glazed state of semi-unconsciousness, because of the early hour. One or two are reading; Griot Goldbaum is a quarter

of the way through "Infinite Jest," and Chip Dwindle is underlining something in "A Theory of Justice." Some are working on their cases or their pieces: from these comes a low drone of presentations being polished and memorizations being honed. A couple are plugged into Walkmen or disc players, their brains idling, too sparked to sleep and too bored to think.

As the students have their routines, so the coaches have theirs. Some correct class papers, some relax, some are as nervous as their students and some are sound asleep like Seth Obomash, secure in the confidence of their preparations.

But then again, not every debate team flies Okeechobee Air. One team, a very small team, is flying Delta.

In first class, no less.

Amnea Nutmilk wouldn't travel any other way.

(At least, not if she's paying for it out of her own money, or more to the point, Metro New York's money. And what's the point of being the editor of MNY if you can't live like the editor of MNY?)

Aside from the Nutmilks, and the four flight attendants stationed in the area to answer their passengers' every whim, the first class cabin of Delta Flight 666 to Miami is empty. Amnea Nutmilk and her son sit side-by-side in the front row. The extra large leather seats are placed four across, with plenty of elbow room for both of them. Amnea is sipping a cappuccino, reading over the first rough galley proofs of next week's MNY. Next to her Chesney is clicking away at his portable computer.

One of the attendants, a statuesque blonde slightly more attractive than Claudia Schiffer, leans toward their seat. "The chef will be by to make you omelets in a minute," she says in a deep, throaty voice.

Chesney nods, and Amnea says nothing. Both of them are used to service, and expect it, on land, on sea, or in the air.

But Chesney's mind is neither on his typing -- he's playing with the HTML code for his home page -- nor on breakfast. Chesney's mind is somewhere else altogether.

Chesney is thinking about debate. More to the point, Chesney is thinking about debate at his mother's side, for an entire year. And he isn't sure about it one way or the other.

There is no question in Chesney's mind that he is a born debater. He won his first two Combat of Conquerors limbs in his freshman year at Manhattan Lodestone, and from that point on there was no looking back. He didn't only break, he didn't only do well, he was a winner. As a sophomore he took King Ivy. As a junior he lost in the finals of the COC Tournament, and made it to semis in both the CFL (Catholic Forensic League) Nationals and the NFL (Non-Catholic Forensic League) Nationals. He was able to beat opponents from anywhere. And this year he is a senior. By rights, he should be better than ever.

But there is a difference. At Lodestone he had been surrounded by debaters -- good debaters -- who had challenged him and challenged his thinking every day. Mr. Lo Pat encouraged his team members to live monastic lives of dedication, meeting and practicing and writing and arguing every waking moment. And Lisa Torte, Mr. Lo Pat's assistant and the actual LD coach, was one of the smartest people Chesney had ever met. He learned from her just by walking past her.

He smiles. Lisa Torte. She was cute. She is cute. Not that old, either. Twenty-two, maybe? Twenty-three? And you, Chesney, he thinks, you're seventeen.

Get real.

Still, she made debating even that much more enjoyable. Until it happened. The divorce. Divorce. Who thinks about this kind of thing? Parents are just parents, they go about their business, you go about your business, and unless they're shooting at each other or drawing swords in the parlor over the hide-a-bed, you just assume that they've been married forever in the past, and they'll remain married forever in the future. Parents' marriages are supposed to be infinite, like the universe. Maybe they have a beginning, but they certainly aren't supposed to have an end, and they're supposed to be expanding all the time. Except, as it turned out, for the black hole of his parents, who were so civilized and New York that they gave no indication that they were even arguing, much less divorcing. Plenty of people got divorced; it wasn't that big a deal. At Lodestone, it was harder to find a kid with two parents, or at least two different-sex parents, than a so-called normal nuclear intact family. But it had still been a surprise. One day they're shopping for a week's niceties at Zabars, the next day his mother is packing Chesney up and taking him to Stockwood and enrolling him in Bisonette.

Who the hell ever heard of Bisonette? Nobody on the debate circuit, that was for sure. But Chesney quickly realized that they weren't so far from his old universe after all. He quickly established through his e-mail connections that Toulouse-Lautrec and Nighten Day weren't merely in the same state, but were actually only a few miles away. Signs of debate life, within the throw of a stone! He would miss Lodestone, perhaps the most difficult high school academically in the country, because he was smart and he liked that sort of thing, but he would not lose debating from his life, if only he could get someone to start up a team at Bisonette.

It seemed like an easy prospect at the start, but Chesney quickly learned that teachers who are uninterested in forensics are not uninterested out of ignorance but out of experience. Most teachers can think of better things to do with their weekends than sit around strange high schools playing debate coach for virtually no money. Chesney found one man, a near-retirement English teacher, who had coached for years in Bisonette's prehistoric past. But there was no way he'd ever go back to it, he said. "Been there, done that," he muttered. "And I wouldn't go back if you made me eighteen again, made me three times as smart, two times as rich, and one time as good-looking."

At which point Chesney had turned to his mother. He had figured that, even if Bisonette couldn't field an entire team, he could travel to the major tournaments as an independent entry. He'd see all his old friends, and he'd get to debate. He'd have to drag his mother around with him as a judge and chaperone, but there were worse things in the world.

But now he is having second thoughts. When he had suggested the idea to his mother, she had gone overboard. She often went overboard. She couldn't do anything halfway. It was always all or nothing. She couldn't just be an editor, she had to be the editor. Not just a runner, but a marathon runner (although she had given that up a few years ago and had gone, well, a little to the chubby side). Not just someone who likes to cook but a virtual cordon bleu chef who couldn't serve a peanut butter sandwich without at least a grilled tomato to keep it company. Supermom. Superwoman. Very Eighties, but the Eighties are way over. And now she didn't merely want to help Chesney out a little so he could debate, she wanted to run an entire debate team.

He closes down his computer and turns to her. The chef is rolling his portable range down the center aisle.

"You don't have to do this, Mom," Chesney says.

"Why not? You know how much I like omelets."

"I mean debate."

"What about debate?"

"You don't have to do it. I mean, you don't have to be the coach."

They are interrupted by the chef, who takes their orders. Jambon for monsieur, fines herbes for madame.

"You don't want me to be the coach all of a sudden?" she asks as one of the attendants hands her a fresh cappuccino.

"It's not that," he says. "I mean, it is sort of strange having your mother as the coach, but I could probably live with that."

"How big-hearted of you. What a grand gesture.

"Let me finish," he says. "I'm not one of your myrmidons at the office."

"All right, Achilles. Finish."

"The thing is..." He hesitates. He doesn't know how to put this. He knows she's only trying to do the right thing, and he knows she's smart and all that and he doesn't want to insult her. But he has to say it. "I just don't think you'll be that good at it."

He half expects her to respond violently, but then again, this is his mother, the one with the divorce out of thin air. "Why don't you think I'll be good at it?"

"Well, you didn't get off to a very good start with Mr. Obomash."

"That pompous fat idiot last week? I eat smarter fools than him for breakfast."

"But he's part of the circuit. He's important."

"He thinks he's important. There's a difference."

"Maybe he's not important to you but he is important to debate. That's just the way it is."

She nods. "Fair enough. I can be nice to anyone if I have to."

"But there's more to it than that," he says, taking the omelet the chef hands to him.

"Like what?"

"Well, you don't know anything about debate, let's face it, aside from what I've told you, and I need a coach who can tell me more than I've already said myself "

"I intend to learn more about it. What that Obomash person learned, I can learn."

"And what about the rest of the team?"

"You mean your friend Worm?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"What about him?" She is now starting in on her omelet as yet another attendant appears with a selection of freshly baked breads and muffins and homemade jams.

"He's only a sophomore, and he's not a very good speaker, but he's smart. What happens to him when I graduate?"

"I assume he goes on to become a junior."

"I mean, what happens if he really gets into debating? What happens if he gets good? You'll leave the team, and where will that leave him? All alone and abandoned."

"He'll have those nine detention kids to keep him company." Amnea smiles. "Binko and the rest of them."

Chesney can't help returning her smile. "I don't think they're really going to become debaters."

"You never know." She takes a bite of omelet and chews for a moment. "Is it just that you really don't want your mother hanging around you all the time? I mean, debate is your world. We've

discussed all this before. Could it be that, now, when it's actually happening, that you just don't want me invading it? Perhaps you're only realizing that for the first time."

"I never said that," he says quickly. But he knows his speed betrays him.

"I understand, Chesney. I'm not going to get in your way. I'm not going to destroy your life. I'm just going to help you out a little bit. And if we can help some others like Worm along the way, why not? You told me yourself that it would be better for you if Bisonette had a real team, otherwise you wouldn't be able to get all your qualifications. Fine. Then Bisonette will have a real team, if I have anything to say about it. And apparently, I have. You are not here as an independent. You are representing your school. Long live Bisonette Technical!"

Chesney nods, externally accepting what his mother is saying. But inside, he can't believe it.

Because he knows his mother. He knows that she is capable of anything, good or bad, but seldom less than extreme good or extreme bad.

Not every debate team flies Okeechobee Air. One team, the Bisonette Technical team, flies first class on Delta.

And most likely, they will find plenty of other ways to be different in the future.

Chesney can just see it coming.

**Will Amnea Nutmilk stick with the team?**

**Will Chesney end up carrying his mother to the fruit cellar when company comes?**

**Is the Delta chef raising his own sturgeon for the fresh roe?**

**Is VBD ever going to self-destruct?**

**Is there life after high school?**

**If you can read the iced tea leaves, you're well aware that the answer does not lie in our next installment: "Volleyball: National scourge or redemption for the scrofulous?"**