



Episode 24

You're Either on the Bus or off the Bus

Miraculously enough, Okeechobee Air Flight 1701D lands safely at Miami International airport. And on time, to boot.

Now the real parade begins.

Most schools travel alone to tournaments, or at most with one nearby sister school, in order to share and pare expenses. But the New York area schools are different. First, there are a lot of them, and they provide a network of self-supporting events that allow a forensician to achieve great heights while never venturing north of Yonkers or south of the Statue of Liberty. Second, and more important, the New York schools have Mr. Lo Pat, the forensic android and organizer extraordinaire.

As his wheelchair rolls slowly toward the baggage area, he is trailed by the marching army of northeast debaters, arranged singly or in twos or threes, not exactly goose-stepping, but not exactly losing track of their hallowed leader, either. Mr. Lo Pat would eat them for a late breakfast if they did, regardless of whether or not they are on his team.

“He’s scary,” William Hand whispers to David Brillig. They are only a few steps behind the tiny Oriental coach of Manhattan Lodestone, and it may be the closest they have ever been to his diminutive gray eminence.

“You notice how he never looks back, but he knows that we’re all still here? He knows exactly what we’re doing.”

“He knows what we’re doing, and even what we’re thinking.” William is walking with his hands tucked into his backpack straps like a rural lawyer thumbing his suspenders. He is wearing his performing suit, because it is easier to carry it on his back than in a suitcase, and also because he is deathly afraid of losing his luggage, and his outfit, to the jaws of a carrier like Okeechobee Air. He is very pleased with himself to have brought nothing but carry-on.

“Mr. Lo Pat's not that good,” David says. "He really can't mind read."

“Not unassisted. But that chair has all the add-on features. Including the parapsychic rust protection.”

Directly next to Mr. Lo Pat, steadily walking along at his wheelchair pace, is his assistant, Lisa Torte. She is stony-faced and silent, a copy of Jacques Derrida's "Limited Inc" tucked under her left arm, and a large canvas bag thrown over her right shoulder. On the other side of Mr. Lo Pat, also pacing his wheelchair, is Alida Devans. Her large six-foot solidity is in marked contrast to the five-foot height of Lisa Torte, or the even more negligible altitude of Mr. Lo Pat's tilted head at the top of his chair. Ms. Devans is talking nonstop, occasionally looking over her shoulder to ascertain that her Brooklyn Behemoth Speechies are still all in place.

“Every time she turns around my blood turns to ice,” William says after another of her backwards glances.

“Tell me about it,” David agrees.

This is the easiest part of the forensic parade, before the luggage is collected. About half the students, like William, are wearing their dress clothes and most have no other baggage to pick up. But all the dress clothes in the world won't make up for the ordeal of the policy tubs, which have yet to make their appearance on the baggage carousel.

“I will check the buses,” Mr. Lo Pat says to the two women flanking him. “I'll be back.”

“Hasta la vista, baby,” Alida Devans says with a smile.

He looks up at her uncomprehending, his eyes narrowed and his forehead furrowed, then he turns to Lisa Torte. “Get my bag,” he tells her.

She nods almost imperceptibly, but he doesn't wait long enough to see it. With a soft whir his chair rolls toward the exit door out of the terminal.

Coaches Dan Ryan and Tarnish Jutmoll stand together apart from the group of students milling in front of the carousel.

“I can't believe they're going to do it!” Ryan says sympathetically.

"I can't believe it either," Jutmoll says. "But it's a fait accompli. I use up whatever's in the budget till about Christmas, the way I see it, and that's the end of it. Plus, I guess, whatever I can make on the Snow Ball tournament, if we can last that long and we don't get canceled out by snow again."

"And you haven't told the kids yet?"

"They'll only go crazy if I do. Let them enjoy these last few months."

Ryan nods. "I wonder if maybe there isn't something I can do. I mean, Toulouse is a big district with a lot of money."

"And it's money that will stay in your district, Dan. Imagine what would happen if your town found out it was supporting my town."

This time Ryan shakes his head. "You're right."

"I'm right. Definitely. And I'm doomed. Or at least the team is doomed. At this point I'm just going through the motions."

"I'm sorry for you, Tarnish. I really am."

"I know it, Dan. And I appreciate it."

With a clanking tumble, the first of the baggage comes sliding onto the carousel. Tara Petskin, Veil of Ignorance's queen of policy, is standing beside her partner, Bill O'Connor, at the very spot where the luggage will first hit the skids.

"Perish the thought that Tara not be the first in line," Haj L. Sworn, the Farnsworth Catholic coach says to Seth B. Obomash. They are standing beside a bank of vending machines, from which Obomash has purchased a couple of packets of peanut-butter-on-cheese-cracker sandwiches. He is studiously chewing one as he responds to Haj Sworn.

"I've never seen Tara anywhere but first in line since the day I met her."

"The Farnsworthians are all in love with her, you know. She's their heroine."

"You're kidding. How do they even know her? They don't do policy."

"She's pretty good-looking, for one thing. And they do notice that, even if it's not their activity."

Obomash snorts. "Come on, Haj. Ninety percent of your kids think they're gay."

“Not true. But even if it was, that would still leave ten percent hot for Tara Petskin. It’s a fact of life. What can I say?”

“I thought they were all hot for that one over there.” Obomash tilts his head in the direction of Cartier Diamond, who is standing a few feet back from the crowd holding the hand of Had Fleece.

“That goes without saying,” Sworn explains. “They may be in love with Tara, but there’s talk of building a monument to Cartier. Even the ones you think are gay.”

“I wouldn't mind erecting a stele for her myself,” Obomash says with a barking har-har. “I’d go a lot younger than I usually do, in her case.”

“They’d end up leading you away in chains.”

“It would be worth it, Haj. Definitely worth it.”

The tubs are starting to roll onto the carousel now, one after the other, the strange cargo of every forensic journey. From her place at the head of the carousel, Tara Petskin is directing traffic, making sure each tub is rolled away quickly, by the true owner.

“Do you know where we’re staying, Had?” Cartier asks. She is extremely bored waiting for her bags. This is always the worst part of traveling.

“Mr. Ryan said the name of the hotel is the Enchanted Hunters.”

Cartier shrugs. “There probably is no Ritz in Miami,” she says, putting the best face on things.

“Since when have you ever stayed at a Grand Hotel at a debate tournament?”

“Sometimes my father comes and judges. He and I will stay somewhere decent, in that case.”

“Don’t you miss being with the rest of the team?”

She raises her dark glasses from bridge of her nose to the top of her head. “Hardly,” she replies.

Had feels a push at his rear, and turns to see Jasmine Maru unknowingly backing into him with her suitcase. She straightens quickly when she realizes what has happened and who she has bumped into.

“Hello,” he says to her.

“Hello, Had.” Jasmine looks at Cartier, whose glare is as meaningful as a pointed shotgun. “See you,” Jasmine says, disappearing into the crowd.

“Strange girl,” Cartier says.

“She’s still going out with that freshman? What was his name? Baglarini?”

“Buglaroni. No. I heard they broke up. She’s very fickle.”

“Hmmm. I just don’t get.”

“That’s all right. Because you just don’t have to.” She leans herself into him more closely.

And all thoughts of Jasmine are instantly removed from his mind.

“Those are mine!” Cartier says, pulling away sharply, pointing at the two nicest bags on the carousel. Had dutifully walks over to retrieve them.

And the tubs are piling up. Four, eight, ten, sixteen, twenty. There is no end to them. The baggage claim area is turning into a Rubbermaid warehouse, with industrious students loading the tubs onto dollies and rolling them around carelessly, with other students getting out of their way quickly or facing the unpleasant consequences.

“What a bloody zoo!” Amnea Nutmilk says to Chesney as they walk past the carnage. Their Delta flight landed a few minutes after Okeechobee Air, and with their carry-on luggage slung over their shoulders, they are on their way to their rental car.

“That’s the debate world, Mom.”

“Lord save us.”

“You wanted to be a part of it.”

“I didn’t want to be a part of--” she sniffs-- “that.”

“And we’re not,” Chesney reminds her.

“That’s right,” she says as they past the worst of the congestion. “We’re not.”

As the Nutmilks head to the Hertz booth, Mr. Lo Pat reenters the terminal, a small satisfied smile on his face, which is as much positive emotion as he ever shows.

“The buses are ready,” he announces to no one in particular, but all the debaters, regardless of where they are in hearing distance, pick up the announcement through osmosis, and head toward the exit. “The rear buses will go straight to the college.”

“What about the motel?” Alida Devans asks, taking her position beside him again.

“You and I will go there in the front bus, with whatever students we happen to end up with. We'll join the others after we register.”

“Very good.”

The last of the baggage and tubs have been sorted, and the parade reconvenes, this time heading toward the exit. Immediately outside the building is a row of four buses, their engines smoking noxiously in the damp Miami heat. They are painted drab green, and a sign on the side of each reads: Florida State Penitentiary.

“In there, in there,” Mr. Lo Pat says, pointing the students at the prison buses.

“What about the tubs?” Tara Petskin asks.

Mr. Lo Pat points. “Over there.” At the end of the line of buses is a truck, an eighteen-wheeler, painted with the dancing skeleton logo of the Grateful Dead.

“How clever,” Alida Devans remarks.

“It’s not like Jerry Garcia needed it anymore,” Mr. Lo Pat says. And then he actually laughs, perhaps for the first time.

"How did you get the buses?" she

"The chain gang is off for the weekend, so they were available. I have friends in the penal system here."

Her eyes narrow thoughtfully.

"They don't cost us a penny," he continues. "What more could we ask for?"

"What more could we ask for?" she echoes.

The tubs get loaded into the Captain Trips truck at the rear and the students get loaded into the penitentiary buses in a flurry of seat shuffling. Mr. Lot Pat takes his position in the front of the lead bus, the motors rev, and they slowly pull out into the airport traffic.

The Northeast is on its way to the Messerschmitt!

Will the buses make it to the tournament, or will they home like pigeons back to the penitentiary?

Will the tubs make it intact in the Grateful Dead 18-wheeler?

Will Jerry Garcia imitators ever start playing Vegas?

Would anyone be willing to invest in Ann Coulter Fast Food restaurants?

Will the NFL put LD out of its misery?

Just try to find the answer in our next installment: "Rice-a-Roni: You can run, but you can't hide."