



## Episode 25

### Brillig and the Slithy Tove

Every aspect of a debate tournament carries its own psychological baggage. The bigger the tournament, the more complicated the luggage. A major, fly-away tournament like the Messerschmitt is the equivalent of a fire sale at Samsonite global headquarters.

The flight is primarily a buffer zone, where most of the students are asleep, or at least in a mode of semiconsciousness from having to get up early to catch an airplane, a sort of hurry up and wait scenario. There is initial excitement, but it wears off quickly in the drone of the jet engines.

But now, on the Florida State Penitentiary bus caravan, where the windows are all sealed shut and there is no air conditioning, or at least none that reaches past the driver, the tournament jitters start to kick in for real. Some students like to act tough, and to pretend that they're not in the least affected by the upcoming event. They joke and play games, but their voices are a little louder than usual, and their comments a little clipped and abrupt, belying their bravado. Because as much as the students whose faces show a look of impending doom, they too are going through the dreaded pre-competition intestinal boogie.

The intestinal boogie. There is a whole volume devoted to it in the standard medical literature. It starts at the back end of the g.i. system and works its way up, twisting to the left, jerking to the right, you do the hokey-pokey and you really feel a fright... If intestines could sing, those would be the lyrics. Because your innards don't care whether your brain thinks you're going to win or lose, whether you're prepared or whether you're colder than a popsicle. All your innards know is that something is coming, something big, something difficult, and they don't want any part of it.

Most students survive the intestinal boogie pretty well, a minor discomfort that they ultimately conquer.

Some are not so lucky. The rest rooms could tell the tale, and we'll leave it at that.

'Nuff said.

Mr. Lo Pat, in the front seat of the lead bus, has orchestrated every aspect of the trip, which he has made more times than he cares to remember. As his vanguard bus passes the seventeenth Burger King, it peels off from the pack and makes a right turn. In the second bus, David Brillig comments to William Hand, "We just lost the king of the jungle."

"Maybe he knows something we don't," William says over the diesel moaning of their own bus, which continues straight along the main drag.

"They could be going up to Disney World instead of the tournament."

"That works for me," William says broadly. William tends to be of the talking louder and more clipped intestinal boogie school, while David is from the look-of-impending-doom persuasion.

Tarnish Jutmoll is sitting behind them with Jasmine Maru. He leans over the seat. "They're going to the motel," he explains. "We're going straight to the tournament. They'll register what they have to register for all of us there, and we'll register what we have to register at the tournament."

"Register unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," William says.

"And register unto Messerschmitt that which is Messerschmitt's," David finishes for him.

"You said there's no tournament hotel?" Jasmine asks the coach.

Jutmoll shakes his head. "We're scattered all over Miami. There's probably a thousand kids going to be at this tournament. We're staying at the Enchanted Hunters. It's about fifteen minutes from the college."

"Is it nice?" Jasmine asks. She has heard stories on the circuit of motels where debaters have entered and never returned, or at least not returned intact.

"It's a chain," Jutmoll tells her. "Not nice, not lousy, just a chain. Beds, TVs, bathrooms, corn flake continental breakfasts. The usual."

"Is this where we always stay at the Messerschmitt?"

"I don't think I've ever stayed at the same place twice. Mr. Lo Pat makes the arrangements, and the rest of us follow. He seems to be a great student of variety."

"Why does he take care of the arrangements?" Jasmine asks.

"You might as well ask why rocks are hard," Jutmoll says. "He always has, he always will. It makes life easier for the rest of us, so none of us complain."

"He doesn't do it for all the tournaments, does he?"

Jutmoll shakes his head. "Only for the ones with airplanes. The rest of the time we're on our own."

"Maybe he gets some kind of kickback from the airlines?"

Jutmoll shrugs. "I wouldn't put it past him. But as long as it's cheap for us, I'm not complaining." A thought crosses Jutmoll's mind that nothing is cheap enough anymore, but he refuses to dwell on it. "You ready?" he asks Jasmine.

She nods. Her intestinal boogie is more clinical than most, and Jutmoll is able to recognize it.

"Don't worry," he tells her. "It's just another tournament. You've done this before."

"But not here. And not as varsity."

"You broke last week at the Johnson. You're on a roll. Your cases are great. Just try to relax."

"I'm not good at relaxing," she admits.

"Close your eyes and sit back for a minute. That will help."

"Nothing helps," she tells him.

He lets it go. Every student has to handle his or her own intestinal boogie however they see fit. He can't force their guts to dance to someone else's drummer.

The trip to Messerschmitt from the airport takes about twenty minutes, which might not be bad if there were any air on the buses. But by the time they pull onto the campus, the students are drenched with sweat and gasping for oxygen. They pour out of the buses like mercury, a gray oozing mass that breaks apart into different sized pellets the moment they hit the ground. And once again the rearrangement of materials takes place with the unloading of the Grateful Dead truck's cargo of policy tubs. Seth B. Obomash has been invested by Mr. Lo Pat with the responsibility of tournament registration and student organization, and he stands by the truck, barking orders. Tara Petskin, his star debater, acts as his lieutenant, directing this student here, that stuff there. Tarnish Jutmoll, with no policy teams to worry about, assembles his Nighten Day students in a group around him. Once again he checks his list, assuring himself that each and every one of them is present and accounted for.

Jasmine wanders a little to the edge of the group and scans the campus. Griot comes up beside her, his copy of "Infinite Jest" tucked under his arm.

"Some place, huh?" he says.

"Some place," she agrees.

Miami Messerschmitt was founded in 1910, when the city was barely more than an outpost at the southern tip of a frontier state only beginning to be discovered by the entrepreneurs who would recreate it as a playground for tourists and retirees. But to make the place livable, first they had to exterminate the worst of the mosquitoes, and then they had to invent and then install wall-to-wall air conditioning. At the beginning they had done neither, and much of Messerschmitt is virtually unchanged from those earliest days. The Old Campus, as it is called, is a collection of small stucco buildings surrounding a small man-made lagoon, dotted with indeterminate tropical vegetation among the requisite palm trees. None of the buildings are more than two stories high, and none of them are bigger than the average Macdonalds. They are painted a faded pastel yellow, and interspersed among them are decorative gates and trellises and follies. The scene is vaguely Spanish in appearance, reminiscent of a time long passed, if it ever even existed.

Jasmine and Griot are standing at the edge of this remnant of Floridian history, looking down at it from a slight rise where the buses are parked. Behind them is a more modern building representing the New Campus. Other buses are also arriving, depositing teams from other schools. These are literal school buses, with real school names on them, representing Florida high school teams. A couple of airport vans are also pulling in, transporting other distant travelers. But there is no one Jasmine recognizes.

"I think I like the old campus better than the new campus," she says.

"Who wouldn't?" Griot agrees.

The new campus, built in the 1950s, entirely comprises four-story concrete-block-and-steel buildings -- CBS construction as the Floridians call it. While it is extremely stable against the rampages of the local hurricanes, it is entirely charmless: featureless cement boxes laid next to each other, indistinguishable one from the next, with small troops of hot-looking students roaming among them.

"I assume we debate in the New Campus?" Jasmine asks.

"Where else?"

"It's unbelievably hot here."

"It's Florida. Get used to it."

"The buildings are air-conditioned, aren't they?"

"Sure. But you have to do a lot of walking from one to the other. All it takes is two minutes to go from cucumber to sodden, sweating wreck."

"Great."

"That's the Messerschmitt," Griot says.

"All right, everybody!" Seth B. Obomash's voice comes booming at them. Like the rest of the teams, they turn toward him.

"Speech teams go to the Claudius building. LD to the Tiberius auditorium. Policy to Marcus Aurelius." As he names the buildings he points each time in a different direction. "There's students all over the place to ask if you get lost. There will be general meetings in each building separately. We'll get together again for dinner and to get to the hotel tonight after rounds in the building right here."

He points to the four-story CBS building directly behind him. Carved into the concrete above the door is the word Caligula. "This is the cafeteria," he says.

"They definitely believe in a classical education around here," Griot says.

"Everybody know where they're going?" Obomash calls out.

Everyone nods or mumbles inconclusively.

"Then go there!" he yells.

In fits and starts, with tubs and luggage and backpacks and briefcases and Walkmen and sleeping bags, they go there.

"Where are we going?" William asks.

"The Claudius building," David replies.

"This is crazy," William says. "I haven't a clue what we're supposed to be doing."

Tarnish Jutmoll appears beside them. "Is everyone still here?" he asks. He looks around for the rest of the team.

"Everyone's here," Jasmine says, coming up behind him.

And indeed all of the Nighten Day team is there: Jasmine, Griot, Kumar, Ashley, Mark, Noah, Cartier, Trat and Ellie. Even though he has done so a mere ten minutes ago, Tarnish Jutmoll once again checks each and every nose against his list.

"Okay," Jutmoll says. "Schematics will be handed out in your buildings. Everybody is signed up. There's no codes; everybody goes by school name and initials. Got it?"

There is a round of nods.

"Everybody gather at the Caligula building after rounds are over. Right?"

Another round of nods.

"Then have a good tournament," he tells them. "Take tin!"

They grab up their suitcases and other paraphernalia and head in what they hope are the correct directions. Jutmoll sticks with the LDers; the Speechies go off on their own.

"I wish we didn't have to lug all this crap with us," David says, his suitcase in one hand and a backpack over his shoulders.

"Tell me about it," Cartier says behind him. This is the down side of bringing enough clothes for a Mediterranean cruise when you're only staying overnight at a Miami hotel. Cartier is lugging two rather heavy suitcases, and everyone on the Nighten Day team knows her well enough not to bother helping her out.

Kumar, the Humorous Interpreter, and Mark and Noah, the Extempers, say nothing. Kumar always seems to be in a world of his own, and the Extempers are notorious, as is their entire breed, for their air of superiority.

They march along toward the Claudius building, surrounded by their soon-to-be competitors. As they reach the place -- yet another CBS box -- the final Florida State penitentiary bus from the motel pulls up in front of the Caligula cafeteria behind them.

"All present and accounted for," William says, holding open the door of the Claudius building for his teammates.

"We've got to practice," David tells him as he passes.

"Fine by me," William says.

Inside the building there are signs aplenty directing everyone to the auditorium. The Northeast drops off whatever they have to drop off, and some of them go to the bathrooms to change into their competition outfits, while the rest plop down on the seats.

"I'll be back in a minute," David says, pulling his suit and dress shirt out of his suitcase.

"I'll be right here," William tells him.

The school is -- thank God -- air-conditioned, which surprises David Brillig, who is used to a sweatier auditorium. There is a men's room immediately across from the auditorium doors, and when he enters it he finds wall to wall students changing their clothes; there are shirts and shoes and pants and jackets and suitcases everywhere, a dozen guys in various stages of uncomfortable

undress, the stall doors shut and the sounds of the intestinal boogie in full force being danced within, one or two more fastidious types at the sinks throwing water over their hair or faces and trying their best to make the mirrors tell them a different story, and finally the occasional poor soul who has come in to use the urinals only to find more displaced humanity than even the Hindenburg could muster.

David quickly changes into his suit, splashes a handful of cold water on his face, and beats a hasty retreat.

He has his own intestinal boogie, and it has nothing to do with competing.

He and William have to talk.

"You look perfect," William tells him when he reenters the auditorium.

David tosses his traveling clothes into his suitcase. "Want to find a place to practice?"

"Lay on, Macduff."

David leads the way out of the auditorium. They have about fifteen minutes before the opening assembly, assuming the opening assembly starts on time, which is a truly unrealistic assumption. They march along, David a few feet ahead of William, down the hallway, past a dozen or so of their competitors practicing their pieces either alone or with their partners. In the time-honored tradition of Speechies everywhere, they practice facing walls two feet in front of their noses, like asylum inmates venting at the unknown. But David is not really interested in practicing: he has something else entirely on his mind.

They are passing classrooms now. David tries the door handle of one, finds it unlocked, and swings the door open.

"In here," he orders.

William enters and David follows, sharply closing the door behind him.

"Not so hard," William says. "You might break something." He turns to face his partner, and instantly reads the intensity on his face. "What's the matter?" he asks.

"You know damned well what's the matter," David says.

"I do?"

"You damned well do." He can barely get the words out. "What do you mean, you're gay?" he finally manages to say.

William sighs softly. "So that's it," he says. "I mean I'm gay. That's all there is to it."

"You tell me on the phone, out of nowhere, just like that, and that's all there is to it?"

William nods. "Yep. That's all there is to it."

"I don't believe you." David drops down into a student desk-chair.

"It's true," William says. "I'm not making it up."

"How do you know?"

"What do you mean, how do I know? I know. I can tell."

"How?"

William sits down at the desk in front of his friend. "How can I tell? That's a tough question. But I've known for a long time. A real long time. It just hasn't been worth talking about."

"So why is it worth talking about now?"

"I'm older. I'm ready to accept it."

"Why did you tell me about it?"

"You're my best friend. You always have been. I thought you'd want to know." He smiles. "Actually, I thought you might already know."

"Well, I didn't."

"But you do now. End of story."

"Not quite." David pauses. "Do you think I'm gay too?"

"I have no idea. Maybe. Maybe not. That's for you to decide."

"Don't you think that if people know that you're gay, they'll assume that I'm gay too?"

"Why would they do that?"

"Because we're best friends. We have been forever. And we're partners. Of course they'll assume it."



"So, they assume it. So what? Either you are or you aren't. That's for you to determine, not them."

"Well that's just it, isn't it?"

"That's just what?" William asks.

"Whether or not I'm gay too."

"Well." He hesitates. "Are you?"

David is almost at the brink of tears. "I don't know."

"It's not wrong, you know. It's not right. It's not anything. It's just the way a person is."

"It's just the way you are. Not the way I am."

"Then there you are. You're not gay."

"I am not gay." David closes his eyes and leans back. "I don't know," he says. "I just don't know." He opens his eyes again. "How do you know you're gay?" he asks.

"I told you. I know."

"But you haven't had sex with anyone, have you?"

"That's a pretty personal question, David."

David snorts. "I'll take that as a no, then."

"All right. No."

"So how do you know?"

"Because how do babies know they can walk? How do birds know they can fly? They just know. It's the same thing."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe you could know that for sure without actually proving it. By having sex, I mean."

"I don't agree. Saying that having sex proves your sexuality is like saying eating chocolates proves that you crave sweets. You can crave sweets and never, ever eat a piece of candy."

"You crave men, in other words."

"I don't crave women. I don't actually crave men, either, if you put it that way. I do prefer guys, though. I really do."

"You're sure of this."

William pauses for a moment.

"You're not sure, are you?" David is almost gleeful in his attack. "You really don't know."

"I really do know," William tells him. He stands up. "This discussion is getting us nowhere. We have a tournament to compete in, and it's going to be starting any minute. Are you ready to do what we came here to do?"

"You were my best friend, William."

"Were?"

"Are."

"Better."

"But..."

"But you don't know if you can stay friends with me if I'm gay?"

"I don't know. Exactly."

"Well, think about it, David. Think hard. Because you and I have been friends forever. And good friends are hard to come by, regardless of their sex, or their sexual orientation, or their age, or their color, or their--"

"I get your point, William."

"Do you?" William asks. He turns and heads for the door. "I sincerely doubt that," he says over his shoulder.

He opens the door and leaves David still seated.

David has never been this perplexed in his life.

But, as William has said, they do have a tournament to compete in. He rouses himself to stand up, and follows his partner.

And he knows, deep down inside, that the problems between them are only beginning.

**Is Nostrum really back from hiatus?**

**Do Big Julie and the Nostrumite ever listen to these podcasts?**

**Will they come listen for no other reason than to figure out the relationships of David and William, Had and Cartier, Bill and Paula, etc.?**

**Does anyone have a spare skateboard?**

**The answers, if any, will be revealed in our next installment: "Barrel Jumping: Ice skaters dream or mud truckers nightmare?"**