



## Episode 26

### Moby Dick 2, or, The Other Whale

The first day of a tournament is fairly straightforward, and it doesn't matter much which tournament it happens to be. For debaters, the first two rounds are paired randomly, which means that your opponent can be anybody (although at intelligent tournaments with a national attendance, an attempt is occasionally made that your initial rivals will be from a different geographic region than your own). The point of this random pairing is to get the ball rolling quickly; there will be plenty of time later for endless waiting around, when the pairings are determined by record and speaker points.

After the second round, everyone heads for dinner, which, at a high school tournament, is inevitably baked ziti, and is God-knows-what at a college venue; usually at colleges it's every man for himself, with everybody heading for the local commercial strip. At Miami Messerschmitt's Caligula cafeteria, a variety of foods are served in traditional cafeteria style -- grab a tray and choose whatever as you pass it on your trip to the cashier. Nothing looks particularly appetizing, or particularly unappetizing for that matter; it's all just members of the food persuasion. You eat it, if the intestinal boogie isn't still tearing you apart, and you forget about it immediately thereafter. The forensic circuit is not known for its haute cuisine.

Following dinner is the third round, the only one of the first day that is bracketed; that is, you debate against someone with the same record as you. But at this stage of the game, everyone is pretty confident that they're either two-oh or one-one, either of which can lead to breaking into the elimination rounds, so no one worries too much about their win/loss record, they just assume they're doing well and get on with it. The telling issue is the quality of their third-round opponent. If they go up against someone good, they assume they're doing well themselves, hence they've been put into a good bracket. If they go up against a total washout, they begin to wonder. The unwritten law of debate is that, in bracketed rounds, if your opponents suck, you probably suck too.

But of course, nobody ever quite puts it that way. Because everybody, from national champ to parochial chump, has one time or another been bracketed with somebody who sucks. And nobody, no matter how good they are objectively, doesn't wonder deep down inside if maybe they don't suck just a little bit too.

Depending on the ability of the tab room staff, Friday night ends anywhere from on-time -- about nine-thirty or ten o'clock -- to damned late -- any time from thereafter till doomsday. At Miami Messerschmitt, which is well-run by members of the college debate team, ten o'clock it is. Which, as we indicated at the beginning, makes the first day of this tournament relatively straightforward.

So let's cut to the chase.

Or more to put it another way, let's see what's happening at the Enchanted Hunters motel, where the Northeast, thanks to Mr. Lo Pat, Travel Agent to the Forensic Stars, is spending the night.

Think about it. An untold number of teenagers, most of them between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, under one roof, overnight, without their parents. You don't think there's a lot of sleeping going on, do you?

The Enchanted Hunters is the epitome of gray, faceless hostelry. The building is six stories high, painted Florida pastel pink. A neon Diana (the goddess, not the princess), complete with bow, hovers over the sign at the edge of the road welcoming "Messerschmitt's Mess O' Debaters." Of course, the participating teams are scattered among more than a dozen motels, but that doesn't stop any of these flop houses from thinking, and claiming, that they're number one.

And if you had a couple of hundred teenagers running wild in your halls, you'd probably make the same claim. You might as well get something out of the experience other than elevated blood pressure.

At eleven-thirty, the scene in the Enchanted Hunters is fairly representative. The coaches, without exception, are nowhere to be seen. Presumably they are safely tucked away in their single rooms, probably asleep by now, or reading, or watching Letterman or Leno as they feel their way between the sheets of an unfamiliar bed.

All the coaches, that is, except one. But we'll get to that later.

The students, on the other hand, are everywhere to be seen. It is, after all, only eleven-thirty. You can't possibly expect them to be in bed yet.

C'est la ronde -- la ronde forensique.

The telephone rings in room 401.

"Yo."

"Who's this?"

"Kumar. Who's this?"

"Ellie. Is Trat there?"

"He's in with Griot and the extempers."

"Who's in your room?"

"Me and David and William. Who are you with?"

"Who do you think I'm with? Ashley and Jasmine."

"Where's Cartier?"

"Where do you think Cartier ever is? I don't know."

"What room are you in?"

"Four oh four."

"We're in four oh one."

"I know. I called you."

"Where's Jutmoll?"

"Four oh eight. He went to sleep hours ago. Once he closes his door, it stays closed. What room did you say Trat was in?"

"Four oh three, I think. I'm not sure."

"I'll try it. Talk to you later."

Kumar hangs up the phone. "I'm going next door," he says. "To see what's going on."

William Hand, in his dress shirt and jockey shorts, is stretched out on the bed, flipping the channels on the TV remote control. David Brillig, in a tee shirt and cut-off jeans, is folded into the desk chair like a crushed origami flower. His expression is bleak.

"Yeah," William says offhandedly.

Kumar disappears out the door.

Alone in the room, the atmosphere between David and William thickens, at least from David's perspective. William continues to concentrate on channel surfing as David's state of mind becomes murkier and murkier.

"They've blocked all the pay channels," William says. "No HBO or Showtime. Just the usual crap."

David says nothing. He is staring at the bed. In a hotel room during a tournament, for boys the bed is the center of attention, but no one wants to admit it. As a rule students are packed up to four to a room, and there is almost always only one bed, since cots not only cost extra, but the supply can barely meet the demand for those very few who actually can afford them. How often does every room in a motel want two cots on the same night, after all?

So the one bed is it. And no one, believe me, wants to share it.

Consider the famous Ishmael waiting in his rented room for his unknown bedmate, and in walks that tattooed giant harpooner, Queequeg. Our autonymic hero fears for his life, at the very least.

(You did take advantage of the Nostrum hiatus to read MOBY DICK, didn't you?)

But male debaters have it worse than our whaling friend. They would be expected to share their beds with a Queequeg they actually know. And the fate they fear is worse by far than death at the hands of a savage south sea islander. What they are in dread of is the vague opprobrium of, simply, sharing a bed with another guy. Any guy. Because you know what that means.

Even when it doesn't mean it.

And you can imagine the thoughts going through David's mind at the moment.

"I'm going next door too," he says suddenly, unfolding from his chair and standing up.

William nods, saying nothing. He appears to be deeply engrossed in the golf channel.

David goes out into the hallway.

The room he is staying in is at the end of the building, across from 402. The other Nighten Day boys are apparently in 403. He knocks on the door.

"What?"

"It's David."

The door is opened by Kumar, and David walks in. Trat and Ellie are laid out on the bed, watching television. Mark and Noah, the extempers, are at the room's small table playing chess.

"What's happening?" David asks.

"A John Wayne movie," Ellie answers. She is wearing a white Pooh Bear tee shirt that reaches down to her knees, and a pair of plastic flip-flop sandals.

David grimaces. "Yuck." This is in response to the Duke, not to Ellie's outfit.

"There's a pool in the hotel," Kumar tells him.

"No way."

"Yes way. On the second floor. Griot's down there. You want to go."

"Who else is going?"

"Probably everybody, sooner or later."

"Where are the girls?"

"Four oh four."

"Let's see if they want to go." David very much likes the idea of surrounding himself with as many girls as possible, as a distraction for himself and a source of misdirection for anyone else.

"Sure."

He and Kumar leave the room. At the other end of the hall, a pizza man is delivering five pies, and is unlikely to get anything remotely resembling the tip he could have garnered from one small extra cheese with anchovies anywhere else.

David knocks on the door of room 404. Jasmine Maru opens it.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"What are you guys doing?"

"Ashley is asleep, as usual. I don't know where Cartier is. What are you doing?"

"We're going down to the pool. Want to come?"

"Maybe later. I don't have a bathing suit."

"I don't think anybody does. We're just going to hang out."

"All right. Maybe later."

"Right."

Jasmine closes the door and goes back into the room. Ashley is lying on the bed like the perfect corpse. She is on her back, her arms folded across her chest, and her face is covered with the orangey-smelling goop that she always slathers over herself when she sleeps. There is the touch of a smile on her lips, which Jasmine thinks makes her look as phony unconscious as when she's conscious.

The phone rings as Jasmine returns to the desk where she is polishing, yet again, her debate cases.

"Hello?"

"Jasmine? It's Griot."

"Hi."

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Working on my cases. Where are you?"

"I'm down at the pool. There's like a million people here. Tell everybody to come on down."

"David was just here. He's on his way," she tells him.

"What about you?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty tired. I want to get some sleep. I really want to do well tomorrow."

"Oh. Okay. You're sure?"

"I think so."

"Okay. See you later."

Griot hangs up the phone and walks back from the alcove into the main pool area. His number of a million people was an exaggeration, but the hyperbole was apt. Seemingly every tournament student staying at the hotel, Northeast and beyond, is gathered around the pool. Some have bathing suits or shorts and tee shirts and are swimming, but most are hanging out. There is no one over the age of eighteen anywhere in sight.

Griot is feeling slightly tentative about what to do next, being the only Nighten Dayer in the place. Out of nowhere a hand is on his shoulder and he hears his name as a greeting. He turns around.

"Had! Hi."

"How's it going, Griot?" Had Fleece asks.

"Pretty good."

"How were your rounds?"

Griot shrugs. "Okay. I'm three-oh."

"Me too, I think."

Griot nods. "You are. At least two-oh, anyhow. I saw the schematic."

"You going to read?" Had asks him, pointing at the copy of INFINITE JEST in Griot's left hand.

"I'm just waiting for the rest of Nighten Day to get down here. I sort of feel like playing cards or something."

"You're not going to swim?"

Griot shakes his head. "Chlorine is against my religion."

"Me too," Cartier says, coming up behind them.

"Cartier!" Had's face breaks into an enormous smile. "Where have you been?"

"Busy. Come with me."

"Okay." He looks back at Griot. "See you later."

Griot looks enigmatic but says nothing.

"Where are we going?" Had asks.

Cartier has taken his hand into hers, entwining their fingers. She leads him out of the pool area.

"I've got a surprise," she says.

"What?"

"I'll tell you when we get there."

She presses the elevator button, and a door opens immediately. They enter, she presses 6 for the top floor, then turns and wraps her arms around Had's back, pulling him close and kissing him uninterrupted until the elevator stops. They pull apart and exit.

"Where are we going?" Had asks. "Who's on this floor?"

"I am," she tells him.

"I thought everybody from Nighten Day was on four."

"I'm not everybody, Had. I went down to the desk and got my own room."

"What?"

"I've got credit cards. I can't stand sleeping in debate hotels with other people. I always get my own room if I can."

"And that's where we're going?"

"You don't want to?" They are standing in front of room 615. Cartier inserts her electronic key card into the lock box.

Had is hesitant. "I don't know..." he begins.

"I know," she says, kicking the door open with her foot and wrapping herself around him again. While they're kissing she guides him into the room, and the door closes behind them.

The circle of la ronde forensique is turning.



And it will continue to turn as the night progresses.

**What is going on behind the closed doors of the Enchanted Hunters?**

**Is Had in over his head?**

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**Should fans of Nostrum run out and buy French dictionaries?**

**Since when did installments become episodes?**

**Is Linkin' Douglas really the inventor of the Internet?**

**The hiatus is definitely over, as witnessed by the next episode of Nostrum: "Pate de foie gras: Key to French longevity or terrorist plot to rid the country of Canada geese?"**