



Episode 29

What's Good About It?

It is on the morning of the second day that the fog sets in.

The excitement of travel has long since subsided, replaced now by the inevitable fatigue: the Saturday morning fog. Friday began early and ended late, and in between there was competition, uncomfortable chairs, bad food and general jitters. When the last light went out last night, a little after four a.m., sleep was needed desperately; when the first alarm went off this morning, a little before six a.m., it was clear that sleep would not be forthcoming. So the fog will persist until the adrenaline kicks in, its estimated time of arrival a few hours from now.

The last to sleep and the first to wake was Tara Petskin. She and her partner Bill O'Connor spent hours updating their files, preparing for what is to come today. They know what their opponents are running, and they have a pretty good idea which opponents they're likely to face, so there's no excuse for lack of preparation. Tara is determined that last week's victory at the Johnson Memorial will be no mere flash in the pan; she is looking to bring home so many trophies that there won't be enough room in all the hallways of Veil of Ignorance to house them. That is the bang with which she wishes to leave high school next June.

The process of awaking, cleaning and dressing the assorted debaters and Speechies through the fog at the Enchanted Hunters is clumsy and argumentative. Aside from Tara, no one is happy to be awake, and they grumble and gripe and complain and carp as they trip over one another getting in and out of the bathroom or looking under the bed for their luggage or scouting out yet another bucket of ice. Every television set is on much too loud, bad cartoons and local news and the Weather Channel, except for the one room with illegal HBO where approximately three and a half eyes and two ears are semi-glued to a puff piece on the making of "Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls."

In the Nighten Day girls' room, Jasmine Maru is the first to shower. The sight of no Cartier annoys her immensely. As the hot water stirs her consciousness, she softly complains to herself

about who does Cartier think she is, getting her own room, is she better than the rest of us, just because her father has too much money and too many sports cars, the nerve of some people -- all the while trying unsuccessfully not to let the vision of Had Fleece into her mind, even though Had is the real reason Jasmine is angry with Cartier. Just when it looked as if he was actually showing some interest in her, Cartier came along and ruined everything.

The bitch.

In one of the two Nighten Day boys' rooms, William Hand is lying on the bed with one eye open, watching his friend and partner David Brillig literally sing and dance his way in and out of the bathroom and into his clothes. After their argument yesterday, David's behavior is totally inexplicable.

"What got into you?" William finally mutters as he attempts to pull himself upright.

"Nothing," David replies. "And everything."

"If you don't stop bubbling, I may be forced to put you out of my misery." The words are groggy and hoarse.

"Welcome to the Bahamas," David says, adjusting his tie.

William stares momentarily. "Whatever," he says, picking himself up and carrying himself into the bathroom.

There is little difference in what is happening from room to room, regardless of what school or even what part of the country the students come from. It is a fact of life that teenagers are not meant to rise early, and that they react on a scale anywhere from dreadfully to abominably when they have to do so. Most of them move through the fog barely knowing where or who they are. There is only the knowledge that they have to be somewhere soon, although they're not sure exactly where, and they will keep moving until they get there, at which time, hopefully, they will be able to go back to sleep.

There are exceptions, however. Ashley Ambrose, Nighten Day's Original Orator, wakes up at six ten and pops out of bed with a big smile and immediately wishes everyone who happens to be around her a good morning. At the moment, Jasmine is still in the bathroom and Ellie DiBella is furiously trying to find her left shoe, and has no interest in returning the greeting. But Ashley is undaunted. She rises from the bed and stretches, then begins running in place, then thrusting her right leg out, then her left leg, her right leg, her left leg, right leg, left leg--

"Are you feeling all right?" Ellie asks, trying to avoid the fury of the kicking feet.

"Aerobics," Ashley says breathlessly.. "Very important."

"You don't say." Suddenly spotting her errant shoe under the so-called easy chair, Ellie dives for it before it has a chance to disappear again.

Of course, not all of the transients at the Enchanted Hunters are teenagers. The coaches, each in his or her own room since arrival, or so at least the students think, do whatever coaches do behind their closed doors, and seem unaffected by the early hour. The first person to emerge to head toward the complimentary continental breakfast is Mr. Lo Pat. His door opens, and his wheelchair whirs out, heading toward the elevator. As he rolls along the thin spotted gray carpet in the corridor, another door opens, and Seth B. Obomash appears. He has not slept all night, and has only just returned to the hotel.

"Mr. Lo Pat!" Obomash's voice booms down the hall.

The wheelchair stops, and Obomash catches up with the little oriental man. They exchange a few words, then Mr. Lo Pat spins the wheelchair around and heads back toward his room, with Seth B. Obomash following in his wake. Obomash walks with his whole body sagging, his head low, his shoulders slumped over. He looks like a bear caught with his hands in the honey jar, which is not all that far from reality.

"You think we could call up for some room service?" are the last words that he speaks as he enters Mr. Lo Pat's room behind the wheelchair and closes the door behind him.

In forensic terms, this visit to the dean of Northeast debate is, for Obomash, the equivalent of a trip to the principal's office.

In another hotel entirely, but in its way not all that different from the Enchanted Hunters, a mother and son are sharing a fairly decent room, with full HBO and all the other amenities, although neither has taken much advantage of them. Last night they both went to sleep quickly and both had as good a night's rest as can be expected. Amnea is the one to answer the wake-up call, which she does as softly as possible in order to let Chesney have as much rest as he can. He certainly needs it. Not that Amnea isn't tired herself. She judged all three rounds last night, the first time she's truly been tossed into the fray. Comparing notes with Chesney after the rounds, she feels relatively confident that she has acquitted herself pretty well, that her decisions were fair, her ballots relevant, and most of all, the points she assigned to the winners and losers were reasonable. Chesney had impressed this upon her more than anything in her preparation. The worst thing you can do, he told her, is screw a good debater by giving them low points. Those points may mean the difference between breaking into the elimination rounds and playing Frisbee for the remainder of the afternoon. The opposite, giving lesser debaters too many points, is not exactly desirable, but it's not quite as bad, because it probably won't mean all that much in the outcome of the day's events. Amnea had judged a couple of people Chesney knew, and when she told him the points she had awarded them, he agreed that she was definitely on the right track.

On the right track. She sighed. She certainly hoped so. She was going to be dedicating a whole lot of time to this debating thing. The last thing she wanted was that it would be time wasted.

After finishing her shower, she gently shakes Chesney's shoulder. "Time to get up," she says softly.

Her son does his best to rouse himself.

"After I get dressed I'm going down to the lobby," she tells him. "They have a continental breakfast there."

Chesney pulls his feet to the ground and stands up. "I'll meet you down there," he says. "I'll bring down the suitcase."

"Sounds good," she says.

He enters the bathroom and a moment later she hears the water running in the shower. She quickly throws on a sweat suit; one nice thing about these tournaments at least is that she doesn't have to dress up. After making sure all of her items are packed, she grabs her briefcase and heads down for the lobby and the continental breakfast.

The Nutmilk's motel, five miles from the Enchanted Hunters, is remarkably similar in its day's clientele. But whereas one could hear the clipped, flat tones of the Northeast at the E.H., here one hears the twangier, more rounded voices of the West. Texas, most likely, Amnea thinks to herself as she drops off her express checkout form at the desk and takes a complimentary USA Today newspaper. She follows the growing crowd of wet-haired teenagers to an alcove off the lobby, where a minimalist breakfast awaits them. Coffee, twin stacks of white and wheat bread piled next to a two-slot toaster, and assorted Smuckers jellies comprise the entire layout. Oh well, Amnea thinks, what do you expect? She and Chesney can stop at a diner or something on the way to the college and get some real food. But for now it's worth a few minute's wait on line for a cup of coffee, after which she takes her coffee and paper to an empty chair for a little pre-tournament early morning coffee relaxation with USA Today.

It takes approximately seven seconds before Amnea is mentally grumbling about the quality of the newspaper. As a magazine editor aiming at an upscale readership, she is unused to something as downscale as USA Today. Half of it is photographs, and no article is more than a hundred words. The whole thing is merely tabloid news bites, and she's halfway through it, desperately looking over the top for a possible source of the New York Times, about to fold USA Today up to use it for a bird cage liner, when she sees the photograph.

She stops. It can't be. She looks at it more closely. She reads the caption.

It is.

She smiles. It really is.

This is too rich, she thinks. And, uncontrollably, she barks out a loud hoo-haw of a laugh, an almost embarrassing reaction to the news of the world, as seen by USA Today. Too rich by half, and then some.

She settles back into her chair to savor the picture, happily sipping on her coffee as she does do. The headline over the picture reads MORALS IN MIAMI, and the photograph shows Seth B. Obomash, that horrible man who treated Amnea so impolitely last week, being led out of a police car in handcuffs. The short article discusses a cleanup campaign being waged by the local government as an attempt to win family-value votes in the upcoming election. Dozens of people were arrested the night before, but USA Today chose to use this particular picture.

Amnea Nutmilk completely reassesses her opinion of USA Today. Maybe they're not so bad after all. Who knows what other gems she may have been missing all these years?

She makes a mental note to subscribe to the thing when she gets back to New York.

Will Amnea Nutmilk find a copy of the New York Times?

What are Obomash and Mr. Lo Pat discussing behind closed doors?

Is USA Today really that bad?

Are there any postmodern philosophers who aren't French?

Is Jewel ever going to go away?

We're sure you're not expecting to find any of the answers in our next episode, "Carminative: Meaningless long word or nature's way of telling you to cut back on the bean sandwiches?"