



Episode 30

But in the Morning, No

The word has gone out quickly to all the Northeast coaches in all the tournament buildings.

Meeting. Ten o'clock. Be there.

The summons is from Mr. Lo Pat, and none of the coaches under his suzerainty would consider for a moment not showing up. Such is the power of Mr. Lo Pat. Such also is the power of the knowledge that one of your colleagues was busted the previous night on a morals charge. There hasn't been this much excitement on the circuit since Tarnish Jutmoll and the Myra Moon affair.

Mr. Lo Pat's wheelchair whirs along the bumpy sidewalk to Messerschmitt's Old Campus, toward one of the buildings on the palm-lined lagoon where he has managed to secure a room for the meeting. Beside him walks Lisa Torte, his assistant coach.

"How is LD going?" he asks her.

She shrugs. "The usual."

"Hear anybody interesting?"

"A couple of Florida kids, but they're always strong. One Texan I really liked."

"Any good arguments?"

She shakes her head. "Same stuff everybody else is running. I'm getting a little tired of this topic already."

"After two tournaments? The new topic should be out next week. Maybe it will be better."

"At least it'll be different."

Lisa doesn't ask Mr. Lo Pat about what he has been doing during the tournament. There is no point to it, because he would evade the question. No one knows what Mr. Lo Pat does at tournaments: he is everywhere when you're not looking for him, and nowhere to be found when you are. He neither tabs nor judges; he is Ol' Man Forensics, and, in his wheelchair, he just keeps rolling along.

Lisa adjusts the straps of her backpack. "I've heard that speech is running way behind. We may get out late tonight."

"Our flight is at eleven. We won't have any problem."

"The kids will be exhausted."

"Actually, they'll be quite wired. Nobody will sleep, at least for the first hour. But by the time we land they'll all be unconscious."

"You know them inside and out, don't you?"

Mr. Lo Pat draws to a halt at the stairway entrance to one of the old stucco buildings and frowns. "I've been doing this for so long, I ought to know them. You don't see a ramp around anywhere, do you?"

Lisa walks off around the corner of the building and instantly reappears.

"Back here," she calls out.

Mr. Lo Pat whirs over to follow her. Sure enough, there is a small wooden ramp haphazardly placed at the side door.

"Obviously pre-ADA," Mr. Lo Pat mumbles as he clanks up the platform and through the door.

"This part of the campus is pre-everything," Lisa says.

"Old Florida. From the age of farms and tourists before the boom hit. Spanish-influenced architecture like this was contemporary with the art deco hotels on Miami beach. You should appreciate that. This was the simulacrum of an even earlier Florida, the imagined colony that Andrew Jackson invaded for the Americans. It never looked like this, but this is what memory made of it. Meanwhile, the art deco style reflected modernism, a future that was yet to come. There was no architecture anywhere in the state that was just itself."

"Until the basic concrete block and steel construction. Boxes that can withstand hurricanes. That's the underlying real of the place."

"And, perhaps, whatever huts the Seminoles lived in."

The roll along toward the meeting room.

"Are you frustrated playing children's games with Locke and Mill when you'd rather be touring Disney World with Baudrillard?" Mr. Lo Pat asks suddenly.

"I'm not frustrated."

"But you should be going for your masters. And you're not."

"I will. Probably next year."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better start knowing."

Lisa doesn't reply. Mr. Lo Pat does not enjoy disagreement when he is telling someone how to live their life. For that matter, he never appears to enjoy disagreement, period. The idea that he might be wrong about something is not one that he keeps close at hand. And since he is her boss, she knows when the time has come to keep her mouth shut.

They reach the meeting room and enter. It is five after ten, and they are the last to arrive. Everyone else is already assembled. The room is a lounge, with about ten chairs in various ranges of comfort. Scattered everywhere are Northeastern debate coaches. None of them look very happy.

"Thank you for coming," Mr. Lo Pat begins.

"This is unbelievable," Renate Screeds announces in her sharp, reedy voice. The woman is sinking into an overstuffed armchair, her wrinkled face pulled tight in disgust. "The nerve of that man. Has he no shame?"

"A week ago you called him the most capable NFL district chairman we've ever had," Dan Ryan says.

"You're not defending him, Dan, are you?"

"No, I'm not defending him, but I'm not condemning him either. At least not without hearing all the facts."

"Morals in Miami,' indeed. The man wouldn't know morals if they bit him on the leg. And to think that he's a debate coach. This is unconscionable."

"I am not here to argue the merits of the case against Mr. Obomash," Mr. Lo Pat interjects, ending their snapping with his firm tone. "I am here simply to present the facts, which Mr. Ryan so correctly points out as being necessary to making a judgment, and to offer a method of proceeding from this point."

"And what are the facts?" Tarnish Jutmoll asks. He is sitting on the room's one couch next to Dan Ryan, his sore legs lifted up on the coffee table in front of him. The humidity has not been agreeing with his natural internal stiffness.

"Mr. Obomash was arrested last night in what is apparently a grandstanding attempt on the part of the local government to demonstrate their position in favor of law and order. The location where Mr. Obomash was apprehended was a known hangout for streetwalkers, a number of whom had been arrested earlier in the evening. The operation was virtually ended when a last team of undercover police headed back to the spot for one final sweep. A policewoman masquerading as a streetwalker attracted Mr. Obomash, who made an offer of money for physical favors, at which point he was taken in hand by the woman's police partners."

"You don't know for sure that he offered her money," Dan Ryan said, defending Obomash.

"No I don't," Mr. Lo Pat agreed. "But it is not an unreasonable assumption. Bear with me for just a little longer, Mr. Ryan."

We should probably note at this time that, more often than not, debate coaches refer to one another formally as Mr., Mrs., or Ms, mostly by force of habit. In the educational arena, there is little separating the educator from the educatee as far as basic humanity is concerned. Age is usually the only differential, and often not much of that. To keep the chasm between teacher and student as wide as possible, an artificial measure of formality acts as a reflection of, and often a substitute for, respect. Teachers -- or any adults -- who are known to students by their first names, or worse, by nicknames, are considered by the Mr.-Mrs.-Ms. crowd to be little more than kid wannabes.

Mr. Lo Pat continues. "Mr. Obomash was taken into custody, and brought before a judge, formally charged with a variety of morality offenses, all of them misdemeanors. The public defender, for the sake of expediency, was able to have the more heinous charges dropped in exchange for a plea of guilty to the symbolically negligible charge of disturbing the peace. A fine of one hundred dollars was assessed, which Mr. Obomash charged to his L.L. Bean Visa card. He was, at that point, able to walk out of the court a free man."

"Disturbing the peace?" Tarnish Jutmoll says. "A misdemeanor? So what's the problem?"

"Mr. Obomash was photographed entering the police station, a press event staged as a part of the city's morals cleanup. That photograph appeared this morning in USA Today."

"Oh my God."

"Exactly." Mr. Lo Pat looks from one coach to the other. Haj L. Sworn and Alida Devans are also present, and at this point it is Ms. Devans who speaks up.

"So we can expect repercussions, is what you're saying," she says.

"The repercussions have already begun. Mr. Obomash was contacted this morning by his principal, who apparently had the newspaper put before him by a Veil of Ignorance parent. Mr. Obomash has left Miami and returned home. Ms. Torte and I have agreed to take on responsibility for his students and make sure that they arrive home safely after the tournament."

"He'll never survive this," Dan Ryan says.

"And why should he?" Renate Screeds asks. "He has committed a disgusting action, for which he must be punished."

"He's only human, Renate."

"Soliciting prostitutes may be human, Mr. Ryan, but it is hardly the sort of action we should be encouraging among our coaches. Especially in the middle of a tournament, when we are all the focus of everyone's attention. We do have standards to maintain." Her skinny face puckers even further. "You do agree with that, don't you?"

"In other words, if he went out and bought a hooker on his own time, it wouldn't be quite so bad."

"That was not my point, Mr. Ryan. You're not still defending the man, are you?"

"He made a mistake. He's a human being. I'm not going to condemn him or defend him. I'm just going to forget about it."

"If you can," Mr. Lo Pat says. "It is out of our hands now, but I would not be surprised if the press makes something out of this when we return home. It is not big news in Miami, but it will be earth-shattering back home."

"It won't affect us," Ryan says.

"It most certainly will," Mr. Lo Pat counters. "Mr. Obomash has already related to me his decision to resign from Veil of Ignorance immediately. He will be gone, but the stain on teachers, and more importantly, on teachers like us who travel around the country with their students, will not disappear so quickly. It will be up to us to remove that stain. And to face the press, and no doubt the parents, who will be riled up by this incident."

"What do you want us to say to them?" Haj L. Sworn asks.

"That this is an unfortunate incident that reflects only on one man, and not on an entire group or an entire activity."

"Isn't that obvious?" Ryan asks.

"To us, perhaps. But to the parents of your students, perhaps not. They will look at you with new eyes, Mr. Ryan, and wonder if you too aren't out soliciting streetwalkers when you should be keeping an eye on their children."

"This is not good," Tarnish Jutmoll says.

"Not good? It is terrible." Mr. Lo Pat looks at his watch. "Rounds are going to begin again soon. We will have to get back. There is one final thing, the most important of all," he says.

"What's that?" Jutmoll asks.

"The students. The press can only make so much of this, and the parents will ultimately decide to continue to trust us, because the alternative is too bleak for them to consider. But the students... They will never forget this. And they will never let us forget this. It will immediately enter into forensic legend, and they will never look at us exactly the same way again. We will recover some of our dignity, but not all of it." Mr. Lo Pat places his hand on the controls of his wheelchair. "And for that, I, for one, shall never forgive Mr. Obomash."

He spins and whirs toward the door, which Lisa Torte opens for him. The two go off, leaving the rest of the coaches behind him.

"What about the NFL?" Lisa asks as they head away from the Old Campus. "They'll probably have something to say about this too."

"No doubt they will," Mr. Lo Pat says. "Someone else will have to take over directing the district. Not to mention taking over the Veil of Ignorance team. Those students are the ones who are going to suffer the most."

"I just can't believe this happened," she says.

"Nor can I, Lisa. But it has." He stops rolling and looks up at her. "Never underestimate the human ability to do the unbelievable. Every human being, young or old, male or female, has the ability to surprise. Especially when it comes to the subject of sexuality." He starts rolling again. "I'm turning right here. You'll join me for lunch?"

She nods.

"Good. And don't take it too personally. Mr. Obomash's failings as an educator have nothing to do with you."

And he whirs away, leaving his assistant standing on the sidewalk, watching him disappear.

And the one thing she is thinking to herself is that Mr. Obomash's failings as an educator might have everything to do with her.

Only time will tell.

Will the good citizens of the northeast begin tarring and feathering debate coaches at random?

Will Obomash really disappear from the debate scene?

What is in Obomash's fall that will affect Lisa Torte?

Is stucco really the official Florida state food?

Will there ever be any Courtney Love tributes on cable television?

Keep glued to your seat for our next episode: "Narwhals: Aluminum siding salesmen of the deep, or fencers without portfolio?"