



## Episode 33

### PDA

Sooner or later, there is an awards ceremony, the good lord willin' and the creek don't dry. Or at least there is an awards ceremony most of the time. At an experienced college venue like Miami Messerschmitt, the awards ceremony is a ritual worthy of Leni Riefenstahl and the Third Reich (and perhaps, in fact, it is even inspired by Ms. Riefenstahl -- if it was a good enough homage for "Star Wars," then it's good enough for the tournament director at the Miami Messerschmitt Mess o' Forensics).

The ceremony is scheduled to begin promptly at five o'clock at Messerschmitt's Roy Cohn Law Building Auditorium, and students begin pouring in that general direction beginning about four o'clock. Promptly at the stroke of five, about half the students are assembled in the Roy Cohn building, playing cards or sleeping or staring at the ceiling, and exactly none of the tournament staff have arrived. No one really expected it to start at five o'clock, as scheduled. No awards ceremony in the history of high school forensics has ever begun as scheduled. If it did, it might mark the end of forensics as we know it in this country. Perhaps even the world.

Sometimes an award ceremony can be hours late, because a tournament has fallen so behind that they simply can't catch up. Perhaps the tab room is inexperienced (rumor has it that even as you read this the Yale 97 Tournament is still waiting for the finals pairings), perhaps a couple of judges went off to hoist a few Heinekens without remembering to turn in their ballots, or perhaps the computer has not been cooperative, and the entire tournament has had to be redone by hand. But even in the normal course of events, awards ceremonies run late. They have to: it's a tradition. And where would we be without our traditions? Like a fiddler on the roof...

At five thirty-three, a Miami Messerschmitt head pokes out from behind the stage curtain of the Cohn auditorium. A couple of debaters spot the head and start applauding, and the head immediately retreats from view.

"They're never going to start," David Brillig says.

"They never do," William Hand responds automatically.

They are sitting in the auditorium with the rest of the Nighten Day team, the remainder of which is entertaining itself as best it can, given the situation. Due to the lack of a real meal since the previous Thursday night, when they were still with their parents, more than a few stomachs are beginning to rumble. But not David's or William's. With them, the rumbling is lower, in the furthest reaches of the intestines.

Because they're still in the tournament. They made it to the final round. The final six duo pairs. And now they're waiting for the rankings. For all they know, they could have taken first place. Or sixth. And there's a big difference between those two numbers.

"I've never been this nervous in my life," David says.

"Welcome to the Bahamas," William replies.

"I'm never going to hear the end of that, am I?"

"One Bahamian beauty is bad enough. Two smacks of carelessness."

David smiles. "If that's carelessness, I've finally found what I want to major in in college."

"We're coming in first, you know."

David shakes his head. "No way. That Chekhov girl was too good."

"But her Uncle Vanya sucked."

"But she carried him. Definitely."

"Not to first place, she didn't"

"What about the Durang kids from Behemoth?"

"Maybe. But Behemoth doesn't have the clout down here that it does back home."

"Are you saying they only win because of their clout?"

"What I'm saying is that they win a lot back home because if they don't, Alida Devans would probably clout the judges over the head."

"Maybe. But that Durang was still really good."

"I've seen that Durang a million times. It's the kudzu of duo."

"We're not going to come in first," David says.

"Trust me, old buddy. We're going to win this one."

David lets out a long sigh and slips back into his seat. William remains perched forward on his, waiting, hopeful.

Another Messerschmitt head pokes out from behind the stage. This one is attached to a body. All eyes turn to her.

"We're just about to start," she calls out.

There is a smattering of applause.

"The final policy round just ended. As soon as the tournament director gets here, we'll--"

She is interrupted by the arrival of half a dozen Messerschmitts through the center door at the back of the auditorium. Dressed in suits and ties and fancy dresses, they walk noisily toward the stage, full of confidence and self-satisfaction. They are the directors of the tournament. They are all students at Messerschmitt.

"And here he is!" the head behind the curtain with the body concludes.

This time there's real applause, and all the debaters who were not in the auditorium two minutes ago suddenly congeal on the place, entering through every door and window. Somehow, through the magic of award telepathy, they know the time has come. Team members find their teammates, coaches find their teams, the seats fill up quickly, and the tournament director finds himself standing on the stage at a podium with a microphone.

And then it begins. The most dreaded part of any tournament.

The thankathon.

"Before we get started, there are a few people that we must acknowledge..."

The awards ceremony is nearly an hour late. Most of the people in this room have to travel hundreds of miles to get home. Some of them must travel thousands of miles. The majority are not receiving trophies, and most of them feel that they were shafted for one reason or another. Ex-

actly two people in the room have any interest in matriculating at Messerschmitt, and they are both legacies. The people who have won trophies want to run their fingers over that tin, to prove that they really did it. A handful of finalists are still on tenterhooks waiting to hear the results of their division.

But the tournament director has a few people that must be acknowledged. A few hundred, that is.

This is why they cut to the host at the Academy Awards. Because when it comes to a few people that must be acknowledged, the acknowledgers never know when to stop. The thing is, these people really don't have to be acknowledged. Few if any of them are in the room to hear it, and most of them had no choice, and no one in the audience gives a flying flapdoodle anyhow.

But that's never stopped anybody with a captive microphone yet, and it's unlikely to stop anybody in the future. An awards ceremony without a thankathon is like a whale without a blow-hole: it just can't be done.

And so the tournament director goes through his endless litany of thank-yous, and the applause after each name gets progressively less enthusiastic, until in a moment of misguided proselytization he goes so far as to acknowledge his lord, Jesus Christ, at which point the forensic natives begin getting less mildly restless at the director's inability to recognize any boundaries of good sense. That he fails to mention his mother, George Washington, and those brave men who gave their lives at Normandy on that fateful day in June, 1944, is probably merely an oversight. A good ten minutes are absorbed by the thankathon until, finally, the name of the last person without whom this never could have happened has been uttered aloud, and the awards can begin in earnest.

And so they do.

Dozens of them. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them.

Almost as many awards as people to be thanked.

A major tournament, with both speech and debate, has numerous categories and nearly numberless awardees. If each were to be acknowledged singly, the applause could stretch for months. Nonetheless, their achievements are too important to be ignored. Hence, the clap. As awards are announced, the name of each winner is called out, and the entire room responds with one enormous, synchronized clap.

"Joe Blow!"

CLAP!!!

"Jane Doe!"

CLAP!!!

"George of the Jungle!"

CLAP!!!

It's murder on the hands after a while, your palms turning red and hot, but it does move a ceremony along quickly. Only the finalists will be rewarded with true applause, while the winners will receive the inevitable well-earned standing ovation.

At the Messerschmitt, the speech awards come first. Unfortunately for David and William, the duo awards are the last of these. They must wait at the edge of their seats for all the other claps and the applauses and the stand-ups for Extemp and OO and HI and all the others.

But finally the Duo octofinalists are called to the stage. David and William, feeling as if the eyes of the entire world are upon them, stand up, adjust their jackets and ties, and walk up to join the others. Most of these people know already how they've done, and the only thing they have to be nervous about is not tripping and falling off the stage into the front row, and figuring how to shake hands and accept the trophy at the same time when there's two in a team and one tournament handshaker and one tournament trophy distributor. At least at the Messerschmitt both team members get a trophy; at some tournaments, the team gets to share the trophy, which means that the tournament is too cheap to acknowledge everyone with a five buck piece of tin, but then again, times are tight and money is money...

The names of the non-advancing octofinalists are read, and each gets the clap.

The names of the non-advancing quarterfinalists are read, and each gets the clap.

The names of the non-advancing semifinalists are read, and each gets the clap.

And now only six pairs remain on the stage, David and William among them. They will now be counted down from the last to the first, sixth place to first place. For the contenders, this is the hardest part of all.

Number six -- it is not David and William.

Number five -- it is not David and William.

Number four -- it is not David and William.

Number three-- it is not David and William.

And then there's only two pairs left. David and William and the team from Brooklyn Behemoth. The four of them shake hands and wish the other side good luck, while in their innermost cores wishing that the other side: a) lose, and b) if they do win, be cursed for life with plagues so vile that even God couldn't come up with them.

"And in second place, from Brooklyn Behemoth..."

David Brillig breathes out for the first time in the last hour. He looks at William. They smile at each other. Then, as the Behemoths take their trophies, William embraces David with a big bear hug.

In front of everybody.

And David wants to die right there, firm in the belief that now everyone in the room, everyone in forensics, everyone in America, will think that he's gay.

"Damn it," he shrieks.

William pulls away. "What?"

"And the Miami Messerschmitt champion Duo team, from Nighten Day School, are David Brillig and William Hand."

The crowd rises to its feet. On the stage the applause sounds like a force of nature. David and William -- confused, ecstatic, scared, hateful, intolerant, proud, loving -- shake some hands and a moment later William and David are holding enormous trophies, which they carry back to their seats.

And the rest of the awards are given out, for the policy and Lincoln Douglas debaters. In policy, Tara Petskin and Bill O'Connor make it two in a row, but their coach is nowhere around to share in their glory. In Lincoln-Douglas, no school from north of the Mason-Dixon line makes it past quarters, but there is some good news for Nighten Day: Jasmine Maru and Griot Goldbaum did make it to quarters, which means that they both have earned a limb toward entering the end-of-the-year Combat of Conquerors championship. In fact, Griot is now fully qualified as a result of his win the week before at the Andrew Johnson.

And so, the Miami Messerschmitt Mess o' Forensics finally comes to an end. The tournament director bids everyone a safe trip home, there is one final blast of applause, and it is over.

But for some, the ramifications are just beginning.

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**Does this mean that David and William are going steady in the eyes of the world?**

**Is the Messerschmitt really over?**

**Is Yale really over?**

**Did the guy who wrote the diary about going to China *before* Marco Polo bring back meat balls?**

**Will we ever have a resolution we actually voted for?**

**Does anyone really expect people to want to listen to a soap opera about debating?**

**Any answers to these questions are probably hidden in rebus puzzles in our next episode:  
"Asteroids: How to cure their painful itching."**