



Episode 34

One to hold the bulb and five to twist the ladder

All good things must come to an end.

So too must bad things, mediocre things, excruciating things, exhilarating things, baffling things, obsessive things, and inconsequential things, not to mention speech and debate tournaments, which collect all those things and more into two (or occasionally three) short days. Now then, therefore, like all things, concludes the Miami Messerschmitt Mess o' Forensics.

At eleven-thirty p.m., Okeechobee Air's flight 800 has reached its cruising altitude of thirty thousand feet. The flight attendants have long since finished demonstrating how to transform the meal tray into a jet ski in the unlikely event that the plane might land somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle, and the pilot has turned out the cabin lights, and by rights everyone should be quiet, half-asleep at least after a brutally long two days of competition.

Right.

When someone has been wired up for the last forty hours, turning off like a light switch is not an option. So the Northeast contingent, gathered together on Okeechobee Air 800, is bouncing off the walls, or at least bouncing as much as one can off the sides of an airplane in flight. Students are sitting on arm rests and laps and floors and tray tables and one or two are even trying to squeeze into the overhead luggage compartments. The noise level is set at stun, and one can barely hear the drone of the engines above the voices. Mr. Lo Pat was correct in his prediction that a half hour from now most of these people will be unconscious, but that half hour will be a long time in coming.

"How many Obomashes does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Chip Dwindle asks Griot Goldbaum. They are sitting next to each other playing chess.

"Don't be silly," Griot responds, having heard this joke seven times already. "Obomashes don't screw light bulbs."

"Unbelievable," Chip says. He is still wearing the Farnsworth debate uniform of blazer and chinos; maybe they're painted on. "If you ever wondered what coaches do while we're in rounds, when they're not judging now you know."

Griot takes one of Chip's pawns. "I don't think all of them are exactly taking fallen doves into the local hourly-rate motels," he says blandly. "Look at some of these people."

Chip lifts himself up to look over the seat back in front of him, and he can see Mr. Lo Pat facing in his direction and talking to Alida Devans. Ms. Devans is looking grimmer than a dead moose, as not one of her students placed in finals. A travesty, she announced loudly while they were waiting to board the plane, and one assumes she really means it.

Chip slips back into his seat. "They're not getting it for free, I'll tell you that."

"They're not getting it period," Griot says. "Welcome to the Bahamas."

Needless to say, the subject of Seth B. Obomash's arrest has been hot among the students since awareness of it first started to spread in the early morning. The concern expressed in the coaches' meeting that day has become real: there will definitely be a student backlash against their accompanying adults, at least in a real lessening of respect for the coaches as a group. It may pass, but it will take time, and it will be tougher on some students and some coaches than others.

Tara Petskin and Bill O'Connor are sitting in the last seat on the left side of the cabin, behind the rest of the Veil of Ignorance contingent. They, of course, are the students directly affected by the incident, the ones bearing the indirect mark of Cain, and so far they have had the least to say about it. Tara is sitting with her Messerschmitt trophy in her lap, staring off into nothingness. Usually she tosses her trophies to Obomash to carry for her, a private joke between them, as if she really didn't care about taking the tin at the end of the day. This trophy she hasn't let go of since she accepted it. This one does mean something to her, but by looking at her you can't tell what, and you wonder if she can tell either.

In their still-wired ways, each group of students has its own way of returning to reality. The policy teams, which have gravitated with Veil to the rear, are still very much engaged in understanding their rounds. Since they debate only one topic a year, that topic quickly takes on a life of its own. At the first tournament certain arguments are presented, and some of them win and some of them lose. At the next tournament, the losing arguments are gone, some of them completely, some of them merely transformed in hopes of creating a winner. The previous winners are back in force, often in the hands of the possessors of last week's losing arguments. And many of the winners are back but also transformed, presumably strengthened for their reentry into battle. And finally, there are the totally new arguments, which at this point in the evening have now taken their places in the wining/losing categorization. Every single policy debater knows which argu-

ments won, which ones lost and which ones drew. Now they're all analyzing these results, and already beginning to lay their plans for next week.

In the middle of the plane are the LDers. Their arguments have had similar lives of win and loss and transformation, but they will never argue this topic again. A new one awaits them at their next tournament, and they can shake this one off forever, or at least until next year, when it marginally resurfaces with slightly different wording. So the LDers are the first to withdraw from the hot-wiring of the competition. Some of them, like Griot Goldbaum and Chip Dwindle, play games like chess or even spades, where somehow four students find a way to create an in-air virtual bridge table, despite the lack of space, comfort or flat surfaces. Most of the Farnsworth team is huddled around one area, rooting their favorites on in a hot game of You Don't Know Jack on someone's laptop computer; cdrom-equipped laptops are de rigeur in Farnsworthian circles. A few other LDers are reading or simply listening to headsets. This group will be the first to slip into unconsciousness.

Lastly, the Speechies have loosely congregated in the front of the plane. Since they are the theatrical contingent, they act theatrical. Or at least some of them do, that is, the dramatic interpers and their ilk. The Brooklyn Behemoth duo team is standing in the aisle, performing the piece that won them last year's New York State Championship. It is a comic take from Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," and the other students are laughing and applauding and generally cheering them on to ham it up dreadfully, which they do with unabashed glee.

William Hand is right in the middle of this, applauding with the rest of them.

David Brillig is sitting half a plane away, staring out the window at the blackest night, still feeling murderous toward his partner.

And speaking of relationships, Had Fleece and Cartier Diamond have managed to find the balcony, so to speak, where they are making out like barnyard livestock on the first warm day of spring. No one pays any attention to them, and they, likewise, pay no attention to anyone else.

Well, maybe that's not true. Because Jasmine Maru can see them out of the corner of her eye, and no amount of trying to concentrate on her calculus textbook can distract her from their goings-on. At one point Had opens his eyes and he and Jasmine exchange a glance, the meaning of which neither understands.

And in another corner of the cabin, Tarnish Jutmoll is softly laying out his plans to Dan Ryan.

"The thing is," Jutmoll says, "if Nighten Day drops debate, that will be the end of it. They'll never start it up again. The voters barely ever pass the school budget to begin with. A couple of times, for that matter, they haven't passed it, and it's had to be redone and voted on all over again."

"Would you really quit Nighten Day?" Ryan asks.

"If Veil would hire me? Maybe I would. I'm seriously thinking about it."

"But you've been at Nighten for years. What about your pension, your benefits?"

"I wouldn't lose much. I could roll them over."

"What about tenure?"

"At my age, I don't worry about tenure. I'll be retiring soon enough anyhow."

"But they'd hire you at bottom dollar. Starting levels. You couldn't live on that."

"There's only me at home to support, Dan. No other responsibilities. I probably could live on it."

"Well, there's no certainty that Veil will even hire anybody. Who knows what will happen now?"

"I doubt if they'll keep Seth on, at least not as the coach traveling with kids. And they've got a long debate history, and they're not going to want to sacrifice it."

"But Tarnish, think about it. They are primarily a policy team. You've never been a big policy coach."

"I've done it. And I could do it again. Plus it wouldn't be a bad idea to broaden out the Veil team, maybe introduce them to speech and LD."

"They've always had great policy teams, Tarnish. Speaking for myself, I'd hate to see that jeopardized."

"You think I'd jeopardize their success?"

"I don't know. Would you? It's something to think about."

"I don't think that would be a factor, Dan. I really don't."

"Then what about your Nighten kids? You'd just abandon them?"

"It wouldn't be me abandoning them. The school board is doing that. I'm not a part of their decision at all."

Ryan shakes his head. "I don't know," he says. "After all these years of you at Nighten, and then suddenly not there anymore. It's hard to accept."

"It's harder for me than it is for you, Dan."

"I know it, Tarnish. And I promise you, you'll have my support, whatever you decide to do."

There is one Obomash issue that no one in the coterie of coaches has spoken about yet. Seth B. Obomash is the District Chairman of the Northeast NFL. While this position does come with its share of work, primarily when the time comes to organize the district's annual tournament, it also comes with more than its share of prestige, at least as far as the other coaches are concerned. It is an elected position, voted for by the member coaches in the district. Before Obomash held the position, Mr. Lo Pat had been chairman. The only reason he is no longer there is because he was nominated to a position with the national organization, and could no longer serve as district chairman as well. Because Obomash was, at the time, Mr. Lo Pat's protégé, it was tacitly understood that he was also Mr. Lo Pat's choice for his own replacement, and he ran for election unopposed.

But that was awhile ago, and things have changed since then. For one thing, Mr. Lo Pat is no longer affiliated with the NFL in any capacity, a retirement taken by his own choice. And at the moment, he has no protégé, only an assistant, Lisa Torte, who would not be a serious candidate for the NFL position. But what about the others?

Alida Devans would have liked to run for the position last time, but she was resigned to the fact that she could never garner more votes than Mr. Lo Pat's chosen successor.

Dan Ryan, the king of northeast tabbing, is due to rise to public acknowledgment. The only thing mitigating against him is his forsworn position against speech, but that position is no more adamant than Alida Devans's forsworn position against policy.

Tarnish Jutmoll ought to naturally inherit the mantle of Grand Old Forensician in the district. But Jutmoll may soon be out of debating altogether.

And who knows what lusts and passions lurk in the minds of a Renate Screeds or a Haj L. Sworn?

What is the joke? How many debate coaches does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Answer, policy division: One, but first he has to have his A team explain the turns to him.

Answer, LD division: One, but first the light bulb has to sign a social contract.

Answer, speech division: The questions we must ask are, What is a light bulb, and why would we want to screw it in? (Take two steps to the right) For my first area of analysis...

And so Okeechobee Air Flight 800 speeds home to the Northeast. Soon most of the students will be asleep (at least until they hit some turbulence over Louisville, Kentucky, when they all wake up and begin praying to their various gods and guiding spirits to get them through this in one piece). And it will be back to school for all of them on Monday, and life will go on as normal.

Or at least as normal as it can be for a forensician.

Will Tarnish Jutmoll go to work at Veil of Ignorance?

Will Alida Devans become the Northeast NFL District Chairman?

Will New Yorkers ever get a team back to the Superbowl?

Is George W. Bush still the President?

Are you sure this is how Dickens got started?

**By now you know better than to seek the answers to these questions in our next episode:
"Grits: Southern delicacy or sneak preview of the Apocalypse?"**