



Episode 36

Put This in Your Tub and Smoke It!

Bill O'Connor is full of debate.

The Sunday morning after the Messerschmitt he awakens at eleven o'clock, and paying no attention to his family, the members of which are scattered around the house in groups ranging from contemplative to seething, he walks downstairs to the living room in his cut-offs and Veil of Ignorance "Policy Rules" tee shirt, grabs the news sections of the New York Times, slides into the kitchen, drops an onion bagel into the toaster, pulls the scissors out of their drawer, and commences reading.

To a policy debater, no news is not usable. Anything that is printed -- from the latest hearsay about the extramarital affairs of Bill Clinton to the latest price for soybean futures -- can be clipped, stored in a tub and transformed magically from marginalia into that basic building block of policy arguments: evidence. Sunday's Times tends not only to print all the news that they can fit in it, but also goes to great lengths attempting to analyze that news as well. It is the policy debater's mother lode, and around the country hundreds of other politicians like Bill O'Connor are likewise settling in with their papers and their scissors, ready to update their evidence. But there is more to evidence-collecting than just the amassing of facts, or factoids (loosely defined as fact-like pieces of information of dubious origins), or at least pseudofacts (pieces of information that look like facts but aren't). It is not enough for a politician to have evidence; it must be new evidence, the newer the better. In the game of policy, new evidence always trumps old evidence, regardless of whether it's facts, factoids or pseudofacts.

As a Master of the Debate Universe -- in partnership with Tara Petskin -- Bill O'Connor knows what to clip and what to ignore at a gut level that allows him to swim through the paper absorbing every article and cutting out only the good parts without ever bogging down in the irrelevant. It is a gift, an instinct, an understanding, an outgrowth of experience: in under half an hour he has finished the Times, two bagels with much too much cream cheese and his first three cups of

coffee. He looks at his watch -- a little past eleven thirty. Tara will be over around noon to discuss their arguments. More than enough time to shower and get dressed.

Bill shuffles back upstairs and goes about his business, leaving the kitchen exactly as he found it, except for the few thousand new bagel crumbs in a seven foot radius of his stool, the cream cheese with a knife thrust into it still on the counter, the New York Times in tatters, and five or six coffee mug stains. Bill is not the neatest person in the world. For that matter, Bill O'Connor is not a lot of superlatives. He is smart, no question about that, and he's a good debater, although maybe not as strong as Tara, but he's a bit mushy around the middle, a kind of flabby overweight that is only enhanced by the debater's diet of sticky buns and pizza slices and fast-food hamburgers. He is not quite ugly, but he's no Brad Pitt, either. Like his waistline, his features are all just a little too large, and his Drew Carey crewcut does nothing to improve them. And all the nostrums and panaceas on the drugstore shelf have been able to do nothing for a less than baby-bottom facial smoothness; to use the euphemism of choice, those "blemishes" are too tough to beat. A high school senior, Bill is fairly unsophisticated for his age in the ways of romance, despite having a good friend like Tara readily available to advise him about the opposite sex. He stands back and watches from afar, always making the presumption that it is not worth trying because whoever it is will only say no. Tara could explain to him how some people do only choose to date other people by the criterion of appearance, but that these are the sort of shallow people that Bill wouldn't want to date anyhow, but Bill isn't ready to hear that yet. He still equates the looks of a Cindy Crawford with the heart of a Mother Teresa. But if that were true, Cindy would still be Mrs. Gere, or, maybe, Mrs. Sharpton, or Mrs. Costanza -- all right, you get the picture. Probably some day Bill will outgrow his shallowness about girls, maybe when he's in college next year, and the right girl makes the right move first. Sometimes that's all it takes, but even in the post-feminist nineties, it isn't all that easy. Especially for ugly guys.

Bill is ready by five to twelve, and sure enough, Tara's car pulls into the driveway right on time at noon. She drives her parents' Honda Accord station wagon, and Bill looks down from his window, waiting for her to get out, but the car door remains shut. Bill thinks nothing of this for a moment, but as the seconds stretch into a minute, then two minutes, and still no Tara, he begins to wonder. He has all the tubs here; they usually dive right into work on Sundays with enormous enthusiasm, especially after a big win like the Messerschmitt.

And still Tara is sitting in the car.

Bill turns away from the window and makes his way downstairs and outside. This sitting-in-the-car business is not a good sign. But Tara has not been acting like herself since yesterday morning, when they found out about Seth Obomash. She's been taking this real hard, almost like a personal thing. It scares Bill a little bit. He doesn't really understand what Obomash did, and he doesn't understand why Tara is reacting to it as she is.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

The car engine is still running. Bill taps on the driver's side window. Tara rolls it down.

"What's up?" Bill asks.

"Get in the car," Tara says without looking at him.

"Why? What's up?"

"Get in the car. Please."

Bill shrugs and walks around to the passenger side. He opens the door and gets in. Tara is staring straight ahead out the windshield.

"What's up?" he asks again.

"I want you to come with me," she says, still not looking at him.

"Sure. Where?"

"To Seth's house."

She throws the car into gear and proceeds to back out of the driveway.

"Seth's house? What do you mean, Seth's house? Seth Obomash?"

"How many other Seths do you know?" she asks, putting the car into drive and pulling away down the street.

"What are you going there for?"

"I want to talk to him. And I want you to come with me. For moral support."

"I don't know, Tara..."

"You don't want to come? You're my partner, remember?"

"It's not that." Although, of course, to a great extent is just that. "What I mean is, do you think it's a good time to go see him now? Don't you think you ought to wait until the dust settles a little?"

"My dust is never going to settle until I talk to him, Bill. I've got to find out why he did this."

"I think it's pretty easy to figure out," Bill says. "A little touch of Harry in the night, if you know what I mean."

"That's not what I'm talking about. The point is, why did he do it then? When he was with us?"

"Why not?"

"Because he had other responsibilities. He was our coach. Our leader. I looked up to him, Bill."

Bill notices that Tara is holding back tears. Tara Petskin is actually crying. He is stunned, and can only stumble over his words.

"I know how you feel," he says. "You liked him."

"Maybe more than any adult I've ever met. He's like the best teacher I ever had -- you know that, you took his Euro course. And as a coach, I learned more from him than... I mean... Oh, damn it!"

She pulls the car over and stops for a moment to collect herself.

"You don't want to do this," Bill says. "Let it go. Give yourself some time. Give him some time."

"Time isn't going to make a difference."

"Time always makes a difference."

"I'm quitting the team, Bill."

It is as if he were kicked in the stomach. "Quitting? Quitting the team?"

"I'm quitting. I don't want anything more to do with it."

"But... but... you're like the best debater in the country. You just can't quit."

"I don't like to do it to you, Bill. You're my partner. But I am going to quit. I just don't want to think about debating anymore."

"It's not me," he says. "I mean, I'm not worried about me. But you-- debate is like your life. Like, I mean, like -- I'm speechless. Maybe for the first time in my life. Totally speechless."

She half smiles. "It probably won't ever happen again, either." She starts driving, pulling back onto the road. "The man has betrayed us, Bill. He has betrayed a trust. I cannot honorably accept that. And so, I am going to quit."

"I wish you'd think about this."

"I have thought about it. My decision is final."

They are now on Obomash's street, in a neighborhood of small colonials and raised ranches, typical middle class suburbia. Some people are out raking the leaves from their lawns, a few little kids are playing on their bicycles. Tara pulls up in front of Obomash's small, boxy-looking home and turns off the car engine.

They look up at the house. There are no signs of life from within. No movement. No lights. No blue glow of a television set. Nothing.

"I don't think anybody's home," Bill says.

"Doesn't matter," Tara responds.

Without pausing to give it further thought, she steps out of the car. She reaches into the back and pulls out a brown paper bag, which she carries with her to Obomash's door. Bill O'Connor, after a moment's hesitation, leaves the car and goes up the stairs of the front porch behind her. Tara is ringing the bell.

They wait patiently for a minute. There is no response, no sounds at all from within the house.

She rings again.

Another wait.

"He's not there," Bill says.

Tara ignores him. "Are you in there, Seth?" she calls out.

No answer. She tries the doorknob. Nothing. The door is locked.

"I know you're in there," she calls.

"He's not in there, Tara. I'm telling you."

"I know you're in there, Seth. And I've got something for you. I believed in you. I trusted you. I respected you. And you turned out to unworthy of it. You hurt me, Seth. You broke something inside of me. Do you understand that?"

Still no answer.

"Seth?" It is a cry of pain, a wail, a loss of innocence wrapped in one simple word.

Still no answer.

She reaches into the paper bag. She takes the first place Messerschmitt trophy and places it in front of the door. Then she takes her Veil of Ignorance "Policy Rules" tee shirt from the bag and drops it next to the trophy. She stares for a second at the paper bag, and drops that too.

"Let's go," she says, turning and walking away from house.

Bill follows her. "I can't talk you out of this, can I? Not before Seth gets back home, anyhow."

"Not before he gets back home. Not now. Not ever."

She gets back into the car, and as soon as Bill is strapped in beside her, she brings the engine to life with a roar and pulls away, driving a little too fast, but she gains control of herself before he reaches the end of the street, and returns to a reasonable speed. Then she turns the corner, and the car disappears from sight.

A minute passes. Then another. And another. A window curtain stirs slightly within the house. Then, so swiftly as to be almost impossible to see, the front door opens, a dark hand stretches down, and the trophy, the tee shirt and the brown paper bag are swooped up and the door closes again.

The sacrifice to the fallen idol has been accepted.

Is Tara Petskin really quitting debate?

Will Bill O'Connor get a new partner?

Will Seth B. Obomash ever leave his house again?

Will any of us ever leave our houses again?

If you open a can of Spam, does it have mail in it?

The answers? Don't be silly. We'd never include them in our next episode: "Chicken fat: fowl lard or foul canard?"