



## Episode 59

### A Night at the Telephone

#### Welcome Back Kotter

Mr. Lo Pat is at the point in tournament planning where the hysteria is beginning to set in. Information is flowing all around him, there are people coming and going in all directions, and there is nothing he can do about any of it.

Resolved: that the U.S. should not restrict immigration.

That is the Lincoln-Douglas topic he has chosen for the OriginalVaganza. What was he thinking about? He is sitting now at his home computer, reading the commentary on the topic on the LD listserv. Few of the debaters are happy about it, which is mildly irksome, but few of the coaches who participate on the line are happy about it either, which is much more irritating. Even though a debate god like Mr. Lo Pat puts little truck in the opinions of lower mortals such as debaters, the opinions of his fellow divinities -- even those demidivinities who have not yet achieved true immortality -- are another matter altogether. Divinity is measured only by those who believe that you are, in fact, divine, and one cannot afford to have that divinity challenged in any way. The problem is that everyone is finding the topic much too heavily policy-based, requiring facts instead of opinions. Mr. Lo Pat shakes his head. Heaven forbid that LD debaters have to deal in facts! He longs for the days when two-person policy debate was the only game in town.

Oh, well. After working his way through his downloaded mailbox, Mr. Lo Pat is about to log on again to respond to a few direct questions about the Vaganza, when his telephone rings. Just in the nick of time, because once he has logged in, the line would be tied up again.

"Mr. Lo Pat," he announces as a greeting, his voice direct and formal.

"Mr. Lo Pat? This is Seth Obomash."

Mr. Lo Pat hesitates for only the briefest second. "Ah," he says. "Mr. Obomash."

There is an uncomfortable pause as Mr. Lo Pat waits for his caller to collect his thoughts. He can understand that this is not an easy call for Obomash to be making, but he has no idea what Obomash might be up to, or why he has called here about it, and he has no intention of inadvertently guiding the conversation down an unplanned -- and perhaps misguided -- path.

"I wanted to talk to you," Obomash says, his usually booming voice restrained and soft. "I wanted to ask a favor."

"Ah yes."

"I've been laying low for a little while. You know, waiting for things to die down. I guess people have been talking about me."

"I don't know. I haven't been talking about you."

"I don't mean you, Mr. Lo Pat. I mean people. Other people."

In other words, not debate gods. Mr. Lo Pat remains silent.

"They suspended me from Veil, you know. Officially."

"I know," Mr. Lo Pat says. "One of my young assistants has taken over your position. Lisa Torte. You must know who she is. It was actually a great opportunity for her, although I have to admit that she did leave me in the lurch, especially with the Vaganza coming up. She is going to help a little bit, though."

"Lisa took the job? Already? No, I didn't know that. I didn't even know they were firing me at all. They merely told me I was suspended."

"I told you, Seth. They are priests. They have a different definition of truth from the laity."

"My lawyer told me that can't fire me without an incredibly complicated song and dance. Indefinite suspension is much easier for them."

"But not for you?"

"Not for me," Obomash affirms. "For one thing, they only have to pay me for six weeks, and we're almost halfway there."

"Ah."

"If they don't fire me, I should, within reason, be able to get another job. Because I won't have that official black mark."

"That makes sense to me," Mr. Lo Pat agrees. "A teaching job?"

"Of course."

"Of course."

"You don't think so?"

"I don't know, Seth. It would depend on who hires you, and what they know. Your crime was negligible, but your sin was more severe. You should at least spread away from parochial schools. A non-Catholic institution might be more forgiving."

"Well," Obomash says, stretching out the word, "that is sort of in aid of the favor I was intending to ask you."

"Ah. You want me to give you a job?"

Obomash laughs uncomfortably. "Well, not exactly a real job."

"I was thinking that your best chance would to be relocate. Perhaps to the Midwest. Or even further away. From the past, that is."

"I've got roots here, Mr. Lo Pat."

"Ah."

"Anyhow, I don't want a real job. Not yet. What I'm looking for is a start. Just a start. Just to show my face again, you know what I mean?"

"Ah."

"I thought, maybe, if I showed up at the Vaganza, it might be helpful. In some official capacity. In the tab room, maybe?"

Mr. Lo Pat shakes his head, a futile gesture on a telephone. "I already have a tab staff, Mr. Obomash. They have tabbed the Vaganza for years now. I could never jeopardize their activities, even with someone of your skills. It might not be lucky."

"You're superstitious?"

"You've run tournaments. Aren't you superstitious about them?"

Obomash laughs, a bit like the old Obomash. "That is true, Mr. L.P."

"I could use you, however, although it's not exactly a position of stature."

"I'll do anything," Obomash says.

"I need judges. For the Round Robin and for the tournament."

"You mean LD?"

"Of course."

Now it's Obomash's turn. "Ah."

"Ah."

"Ah." Mr. Lo Pat can hear Obomash's sigh. "You know that I haven't judged in years. And certainly not LD."

"I don't have a lot of options available, Seth. I'm not running a personnel agency."

Another sigh. "If that's it, that's it. I'll do it. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow night at the tournament hotel, the Hunted Enchanters. We start at seven o'clock."

"Count me in, then."

"Very good. I will see you tomorrow, Seth."

"Tomorrow, Mr. Lo Pat."

## **Pass the Eggs Benedict, Arnold**

"You're going to what?"

"I'm going to try LD."

Tara Petskin's voice over the phone is unnecessarily loud. Bill ("Invoice") O'Connor can tell that she is upset.

"You can't do LD. LD sucks! They haven't got a clue to what they're doing. They don't know how to debate."

"So I'll have a better chance, then," Invoice says, trying to defuse her anger.

"Yeah, right. And even if it was worth the energy, you haven't got a clue to how to do it. You'll have your head handed to you on a silver platter, with your butt stuffed along side it as a side dish."

"It can't be all that hard. I'm going with Miss Torte tomorrow night to watch the Round Robin. She says I'll learn a lot from that."

"You're going into the city with her? To watch LD rounds?"

"They'll be good LD rounds. And I'll learn from them."

"Is anyone else going? Has the whole team dropped Policy and gone over to the other side?"

"No. Just me."

"Just you."

"Well, Tara, be reasonable. It is your fault, in a way. I mean, you were my partner, and you dropped out. What else do you expect me to do?"

"What else do I expect you to do?"

"Yeah. What else?"

Invoice can feel her struggling to find something to say. He was worked with her in debating for over three years, and he knows those rare occasions when she is at a loss for words.

"I expect you to support me in supporting Seth," she says finally. "That's what I expect."

"Well," Invoice responds, "I'm not going to. First of all, I don't agree with you that he's worth the trouble, and second--"

"Not worth the trouble! After all he's done for us? We're like one of the top teams in the country. That didn't happen overnight. That was thanks to Seth."

"And also thanks to you, and to me. We worked hard for our wins, Tara. And if we were such a team, how could you break it up so easily?"

"Because I feel that supporting Seth is more important than the two of us."

"Because you have some kind of hero-worshipping, schoolgirl crush on him," Invoice says impetuously, regretting the words as soon as he speaks them.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." In for a penny... "You're choosing him over me. Fine. Well, I'm choosing Lisa over you."

"Lisa?"

"Miss Torte."

"Now she's Lisa?"

"Well, to you, Obomash is Seth."

"Seth is Seth to everyone on the team."

"Tara, Seth is history to everyone on the team. Except you."

"And now you're history to me!" she says, violently slamming down the receiver.

## **The Fundamental Rules Apply**

Nights are long in Tarnish Jutmoll's apartment. Maybe that is why he doesn't mind traveling with the debate team; at least when he's on the road, his mind is occupied.

The latest episode of "Emeril Live" does not do the job.

The telephone is not near the television, and when it rings, it startles him away from the ruling pork fat that Emeril is kicking up a notch. Jutmoll has to get up from the couch and make his way to the dining room.

"Hello."

"Hello," a woman's voice is on the other end. "This is Amnea Nutmilk. From Bisonette Technical. Mr. Jutmoll?"

Amnea Nutmilk? "This is Mr. Jutmoll." He doesn't know what else to say, but that sounds terrifically inane for some reason.

"Ah, good." The tone of her voice becomes suddenly soft and friendly. "It's Tarnish, right?"

"Yes. Tarnish."

"Tarnish. That's an odd name."

"Amnea is exactly Mary either, Mrs. Nutmilk."

She laughs. "If we could only name ourselves, I'm sure none of us would be who we are."

"We all have ample opportunity in life to be someone else. It's being ourselves that always seems to be the problem."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," she says.

"No, no, not at all. I was just--" He stops. He is embarrassed to say that he was watching television. It would give a bad impression, which he does not want to do.

Being ourselves does always seem to be the problem, doesn't it?

"I was just wishing the telephone would ring," he says, which is the only thing he can think of, and which sounds as if it ought to be flattering.

"Then I'm not disturbing you?"

"Not at all."

"I'll tell you why I'm calling. I've been trying to get some information about this Original Vaganza Round Robin. I tried calling Mr. Lo Pat at Lodestone, but the phone seems to be busy continuously."

"When one is throwing a tournament of the size of the Vaganza, one does spend the preceding week on the phone, no doubt about that."

"You throw your own tournament at Nighten Day, don't you?"

"The Snow Ball. Yes, we do." He holds back the sigh that wants to tell her that he hardly believes his team will last as long as the Snow Ball. His principal, Raoul Walsh, has given no indication that the team will even last till the end of the week.

"It must be a lot of work."

"Oh, it is that. And then some."

"Do you have one of these Round Robins at your tournament?"

"Oh, no."

"Chesney has explained how it works to me, and it's not that complicated, of course. But what I don't understand is the why of it. I mean, to some extent, the Round Robin debaters are the best debaters in the country, right?"

"You might say that. Although there are others that are equally good, I think."

"Okay, that's what I'm trying to get at. We take some very good debaters, perhaps the best, or at least some of the best, and we take a tournament like the Vaganza where there's a unique topic, and then we set it up so that these particular debaters have a full three days of debating the topic with each other before the tournament starts. Doesn't this give them an unfair advantage over all the other debaters at the Vaganza who don't get to go to the Round Robin?"

"That is true to a degree, yes."

"So what's the point, then? To take the best and make them better, at the expense of everyone else?"



"No, no. Not at all."

"Well, then?"

"Well, the Round Robin is more a recognition of these top debaters, and, well, a connection to other main schools around the country. The debaters all represent the top debating schools."

"You mean, they're not the top debaters necessarily? That they just come from the top schools?"

"Sometimes."

"Then what's the point?"

"They're acknowledging the school they come from, and not the kids themselves."

"I don't understand it."

Jutmoll says nothing for a moment. Sometimes he doesn't understand it either. "It's ultimately a coaches' thing," he says finally.

"A coaches' thing?"

"Certain coaches are rather higher up in the hierarchy than other coaches. They use the Round Robins to acknowledge one another."

"So in other words, it has nothing to do with the debaters at all."

"Sometimes, no."

"But it does give these debaters an unfair advantage nonetheless."

"That is true. Maybe. But only marginally. The public is invited to watch the Round Robins, if they want to. Usually a lot of coaches go, to get a sense of the topic and, quite frankly, to size up the competition, if they have strong debaters on their own team."

"Are you going?" she asks him.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'm actually going to be judging a few rounds tomorrow night."

"I think I'd like to go too."

"Why don't you come with me?" The words fall out of Tarnish Jutmoll's mouth, completely surprising him.

"I'd like that," Amnea Nutmilk replies without hesitation. "I work in Manhattan. Why don't I meet you at Lodestone?"

"The Round Robin is held at the Hunted Enchanters Motel, right around the corner from Lodestone. It starts at seven. I'll look for you at six forty-five?"

"Excellent. I'll see you then, Tarnish."

"Goodnight, Amnea."

"Goodnight."

She hangs up, and he is left holding the phone in his right hand, staring at it with a wry little smile.

"You old dawg, Tarnish Jutmoll," he says to himself softly. "You old dawg!"

**Will the Round Robin participants greet Seth B. Obomash with open arms?**

**Will Tara Petskin greet "The Invoice" O'Connor with closed fists?**

**Will Tarnish Jutmoll greet Amnea Nutmilk with fiery loins?**

**Whatever happened to Mac Culkin?**

**Whatever happened to Bill Clinton?**

**If only we knew, then you'd know, but no one would think of searching for it in our next episode: "Moules et Frites: That Brussels treat, or winner of Oscar for best foreign-language film of 1998?"**