



Episode 60

I Wake Up Screaming

The corridor is dark. The overhead lights are turned off, and the only brightness is a soft glow emanating from an open doorway at the end of the hall.

Mr. Lo Pat is immediately apprehensive. There are hundreds of people roaming the building: Lincoln-Douglas debaters, Policy debaters, judges, coaches. Every nook and cranny of Manhattan Lodestone is teeming with forensic life.

Except this corridor.

The corridor leading to the tab room.

Mr. Lo Pat extends his right hand, placing his thumb and forefinger around the little joystick that controls the movement of his wheelchair. He pushes the joystick forward to move the wheelchair.

Nothing happens. His eyes widen.

The battery is dead!

In the middle of the Original Vaganza, the biggest high school tournament in the northeastern United States and the first crown jewel of the national debate circuit, the battery of Mr. Lo Pat's wheelchair decides to go south for the winter.

How could this be happening?

"I'll give you a push," a voice says from behind him. Mr. Lo Pat looks over his shoulder. It is Seth B. Obomash, a slice of pepperoni pizza in one hand and a Miami travel brochure in the other.

"I can't imagine what happened," Mr. Lo Pat says. "I know I charged the battery last night. I never forget to charge the battery."

"Sometimes you can charge it," Obomash says. "But sometimes it's better to pay cash."

Mr. Lo Pat nods in agreement as his chair nears the glow of the open doorway.

"What happened to the lights?" he asks.

"A blackout in the city."

"No!"

"Yes. The electricity went out everywhere in Manhattan. Nobody knows why. They're looting all up and down Madison Avenue."

"Who's looting?"

"Who do you think? It's the Policy novices. It's always the Policy novices."

Seth B. Obomash gives the wheelchair a hefty push, and it goes rolling through the open doorway.

"We can't tab!" Kalima Milak screams at Mr. Lo Pat. She is wearing a necklace with a dozen ears strung into it. "We can't find any of the ballots from the third round."

"They disappeared," Dan Ryan says. He is folding pink paper ballots into airplanes and tossing them across the room at Lisa Torte, who is wearing only a light, flowery sun dress and is idly dancing barefoot to music that Mr. Lo Pat assumes must be Radiohead, although he has never heard Radiohead before in his life.

"How could they disappear?" Mr. Lo Pat asks.

"Looters!" Kalima exclaims, chewing on an earlobe.

"What?"

"Looters! Behind you!"

Mr. Lo Pat spins his wheelchair around. The music changes, from Radiohead to a conga.

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

Twelve Round Robin participants -- a snake of Lincoln-Douglas debaters, a conga line of philosophical dilettantes -- is weaving its way toward Mr. Lo Pat out of the dark hallway.

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

The Round Robinski Conga!

"What is going on?" Mr. Lo Pat asks, turning back to Kalima. She is pulling her own ears off.

"We're five hours behind schedule!" she screams. "The tournament is a total disaster. It's the worst tournament of all time."

"Oh my God!" Mr. Lo Pat cries out.

And it all disappears.

He is alone in his bedroom. There is no sound except the purring of his calico cat. The numbers on his alarm clock read 2:43.

He breathes a deep sigh of relief, and sinks back into his pillow. It is the Monday night before the Vaganza; tomorrow the Round Robin will begin. And Friday, it will be the main event. So of course he is having nightmares. What coach doesn't have nightmares right before hosting a tournament?

"I'm only human," Mr. Lo Pat says to his drowsing cat.

The little orange fur ball, no doubt not believing for a moment this statement of his master's mortality, continues purring, his eyes closed. He does, however, snuggle closer against Mr. Lo Pat's useless legs.

"The conga?" the man says aloud. "I wonder where that came from?"

The Round Robinski Conga. Does it matter where it came from? It is true, isn't it? And the truth is the truth, no matter what its source might be.

Mr. Lo Pat closes his eyes, and does his best to return to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a long day. He will need all the rest he can get.

Everybody conga...

Da da da da da, KICK!

The Round Robinski Conga?

Why not? It is as good a name as any to describe the ritual of that select group. the arcane dance of that handful of teenagers who have devoted their young lives to debate with a compulsive dedication comparable to an Olympic athlete, or a musical prodigy, or a heroin addict.

The Round Robinski Conga. Why not?

They dance in unison from one national-circuit debate to another, crossing the country nearly every week, living out of suitcases in Holiday Inns and EconoLodges and Motel Sixes. Once in a while they go to school, once in a while they see their parents and siblings, once in a while they sleep in their own beds and goof off and watch the Simpsons, but not very often. Most of the time they answer the invitations that they simply can't refuse, asking them by name to participate in round robin events affiliated with the biggest and most prestigious tournaments around the country.

Why?

Once again, welcome to the Bahamas.

We must now return to the realm of the gods. Because at the Round Robinski level, debate is not about students, it's about coaches. Year in and year out, certain coaches field the most powerful teams around. There is no question that they are good coaches, if winning debates is the measurement of a coach's ability. As the years go by, these debate gods enhance their reputations with one trophy after the other, with the accolades from their peers, and with the respect and awe of students around the country.

And keep in mind, they are teachers. A teacher's universe normally never extends beyond a school district, if that far, and a teacher's arena seldom extends beyond a classroom. But a debate coach can cover the entire country, his arena can be the entire connected network of debaters from Manchester-by-the-Riverside to Guam-by-the-Treesnake. A debate coach can extend the reach and grasp of a teacher into national prominence. And time and continued success only further solidifies that prominence.

And thus is born a national circuit, a network of debate gods whose rarefied air can only be shared by themselves. Except for one thing. A coach does, sooner or later, need a debater or two.

Which is where the Round Robinskis come in. They are the best the debate gods have to offer. They are the Hectors and the Achilleses and the Ajaxes and the Agememmons to the coaches' Zeuses and Apollos and Heras and Dianas. You can't have one without the other. After all, plenty of the heros of Homer had a little bit of god-blood flowing in their veins somewhere (or, Bill Clinton has nothing on Zeus, in other words).

So they create a rarefied-air universe, an elite field of Troy where the debate gods can manipulate their chosen mortals, unaffected by the mundane, the average person, the regular debater. The debate gods perpetuate their divinity by inviting each other's heroes to their own venues. Usually the venue is a debate, but occasionally the venue is a summer camp especially devoted to enhancing debate skills.

A debate summer camp. Known to the forensic world at large as an Institute. Where the kids spend all day in classrooms led by slightly older kids who used to be good debaters themselves. Where the charge is roughly a thousand dollars a week per camper, and occasionally a debate god descends from Olympus to give a lecture on 2AR strategy.

Tell me that these debate gods have never consulted a good accountant in their lives...

But it is the Round Robins that remind everyone just how good these debate gods -- and their latest heros -- really are. The Round Robinskis are the stars who ring up the box-office interest at the tournaments and the institutes. A tournament with a Round Robin where national circuit debaters are going to show up? That's an attraction; lots of normal people want to show up for that

debate. A tournament where only thirty-one local kids who don't know a value premise from a Prince Valiant cartoon are due to arrive in the back seat of the middle-school coach's Geo Prism? Fuhgeddaboutit.

And the kids? The heros? The Round Robinskis?

They do the conga.

"You'll get into a better college."

Da da da da da, KICK!

"You'll travel all around the country."

Da da da da da, KICK!

"You won't have to go to school five days a week."

Da da da da da, KICK!

Tell me that these debate gods have never consulted a good used-car salesman in their lives...

Colleges really are interested in a debater's win/loss record. And traveling from one cheap hotel room to another really is so broadening. And instead of being in classrooms five days a week, you'll be in classrooms seven days a week.

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

Da da da da da, KICK!

The Round Robinski Conga!

Will Mr. Lo Pat get a good night's sleep this week?

Will the Round Robinskis ever learn another dance step?

Is the life of a Round Robinski all that bad?

Is Nostrum anti-institute?

Why is Hillary Clinton smiling?

Find out none of this immediately in our next episode: "Monica -- Last hope for the right-wing, or one more for Bill to get under his belt?"