



Episode 64

Godsapoppin

The moment has arrived. The Manhattan Lodestone Original Vaganza (All Other Vaganzas are Extra) is ready to set sail, beginning now with the Tuesday night Round Robin at the Hunted Enchanters Motel.

At six-thirty, a half hour before the first round is scheduled, all preparations are completed. A schematic of the next three evenings is printed out, with each debater hitting each other debater, two double-flighted rounds a night, three judges hearing each round. Whoever takes the most ballots by the end is the winner, to be announced on Thursday night.

Kalima Milak is sitting behind the registration table in a corridor on the second floor, a list of debaters and judges and a pile of blank ballots in front of her. Lodestone Policy debater Peter Stallone is sitting beside her to provide whatever assistance she demands. Three Lodestone freshman are arranging crudites and petits fours in the small conference room designated at the judges' lounge, . And in the center of the corridor, his wheelchair freshly polished and battery fully charged, is the reigning debate god of Manhattan Lodestone, the inimitable Mr. Lo Pat.

The March of the Divinities is about to begin.

They enter, at the beginning, one at a time, with their charges in tow. A Texan debate god is the first to come up the escalator, a wizened little woman not much taller than the seated Mr. Lo Pat, talking to a Round Robinski in a dress the color of a St. Patrick's Day carnation. As soon as the coach spots Mr. Lo Pat she walks over to him to exchange ichor, or nepenthe, or whatever it is the gods exchange with each other in their traditional greeting. Next comes an Iowan debate god, a stately woman with a rather strong resemblance to Oscar Wilde in his last years, leading a thickly wet-headed debater in a brown suit. She too drops her teenager behind her and walks

over to make mutual obeisance noises with Mr. Lo Pat. Next two Floridian gods come in, with a pair of Floridian debaters -- Florida is a big enough debate state to warrant two Round Robinskis. They too make a bee-line for Mr. Lo Pat. Within the next few minutes, the joint is lousy with debate gods, all talking to each other a mile a minute while the Round Robinskis huddle together on the other side of the hallway doing likewise.

The conductor taps his baton.

The orchestra looks up.

The March of the Divinities. To the tune of Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance."

"So good to see you again."

"Where were you at Messerschmitt?"

"How was your Institute this summer?"

From the other side of the room, the small jazz ensemble counts down.

And one, and two.

The Round Robinski Conga. To any Carmen Miranda beat.

Da da da da da, KICK!

"What do you think of the topic?" KICK!

"Early admission to Harvard?" KICK!

"Sixteen hundred on the college boards?" KICK!

Kalima Milak, sitting with Peter Stallone behind the registration table, signing people in as they eventually break away from the amenities to get down to business, watches this convergence of debate gods and Round Robinskis with but a single thought: not one of these people in this room actually likes any of the other people. In fact, without exception, they positively detest each other. The debaters come up against each other virtually every weekend, and are the banes of one another's existence. Each coach is in full possession of the belief that he or she is the singular best coach in the country, and the very existence of the other coaches is a threat to this conceptual construct. Yet they fawn over each other like supermodels air-kissing at a Paris fashion show.

"Bunch of phonies from the get-go," she mutters to Peter at the first opportunity.

He shrugs. "LDers," he says. "What do you expect?"

"You think Policy is any better?" she asks menacingly.

Peter quickly shakes his head. He doesn't want any of his body parts added to Kalima's collection. "No, no. Just different. Different phonies."

She nods, satisfied. "Bunch of phonies from the get-go," she repeats.

The Old Dawg's Network

At six-thirty, Tarnish Jutmoll is waiting outside the front doors of the Hunted Enchanters Motel, his trench coat securely buttoned against the chilly autumn wind. On the top of his gray head is a perky little Tyrolean hat that gives him the look of a cartoon professor on leave from his Alpine institute, or perhaps an escapee from Thomas Mann's magic Berghof.

He is waiting. Patiently. Expectantly.

He feels like a teenager.

At six forty-five, Amnea Nutmilk appears, trotting up the steps to join him. She is the soul of chic, dressed in a long black coat, beneath which Jutmoll can see dark stockings on fairly shapely calves. They do say the legs are the last thing to go, Tarnish, you old dawg, you.

"Amnea," he says.

"Tarnish."

Not knowing what to do next, he extends his hand, and she takes it in hers.

"Have you been waiting long?" she asks.

"Only a minute or two."

"I thought I might be late, but I had no way of reaching you to tell you. Things were crazy in the office today."

"I can imagine," he says. Although he can't. The idea of being the editor of Metro New York is completely beyond his personal experience.

"Why do they hold it here and not in the school?" she asks him.

"This is the tournament hotel," Jutmoll explains. "Probably all of the participants are staying here, and it makes life much more pleasant for anyone."

"But the school isn't that far away," she says as Jutmoll holds the hotel door open for her. "I'm looking forward to seeing it again. I haven't been here in ages,"

"That's right," Jutmoll says. "Chesney was a student there for a while. I had forgotten. He started out as a great debater."

"He still is a great debater."

Once inside the building, the two of them find the escalator to the second floor, where the March of the Divinities and the Round Robinski conga are in full swing.

"This is it?" Amnea asked.

"This is where it starts," Jutmoll says. He quickly collects a schematic and a pair of ballots from Kalima's table, then he and Amnea stand together off to the side.

"Who are all these people?" Amnea asks.

"Most of the adults are national-circuit coaches, the coaches of the Round Robin debaters."

"Who are obviously the kids in the suits." The conga and the march have been augmented by various non-dancers.

"Exactly. The grungy looking kids are the college students. They come to collect twenty-five dollars a night from Mr. Lo Pat for judging."

"I don't recognize anyone," Amnea says.

"You're new here. You'll get to know them eventually." He holds up his schematic. "I'm only judging the first round," he says. "Ready?"

"Lay on, Macduff."

He takes her elbow and leads her down the corridor toward the small conference room in which they will hear the round. As they start walking his hand drops, and he is surprised a moment later when she takes his arm.

He says nothing as they stroll down the corridor like the lord and his lady leading the grand procession to the palace ball.

Tarnish, you old dawg you...

Old Trick, Young Pup Division

"Good old OriginalVaganza," Lisa Torte says to Invoice O'Connor as they walk up the steps to the motel. "It seems like only a week ago that I was working for Manhattan Lodestone."

"It was only a week ago," Invoice says.

"Quod erat demonstratum." She smiles as he holds the door open for her. "How genteel. Thank you."

The march and the conga are still in full swing when they arrive on the second floor. Lisa is hoping to quickly grab her ballots, but Mr. Lo Pat has a never-failing radar system that would take Tom Clancy six chapters to explain, but which we can simply assign as another factor of debate divinity. He whirrs across to her as she is leaning over Kalima to find her name on the schematic taped to the table.

"Ms. Torte," he says to her. His voice fills the hallway, but no one other than Lisa and Invoice pay any attention to it. All debate gods are capable of drowning a moose with their vocal equipment, and think nothing of it when another of their number demonstrates this ability, as long as it isn't directed at them.

"Hello, Mr. Lo Pat."

"You do remember your promise to me, don't you?"

"Promise?"

"To assist me in running the Vaganza. I am counting on your help, of course."

She nods, clearly uninterested in the prospect, but just as clearly committed to upholding her part of any bargain she has made. "I'll do whatever you want," she says.

"I was hoping you'd handle the judge sign-up on Friday, to begin with."

She nods again. "Of course."

"Excellent. And we'll find plenty for you to do after that, I'm sure."

"I'm sure too," she agrees.

Satisfied, Mr. Lo Pat looks up at Lisa's companion. "Good evening, Mr. O'Connor. Has Veil of Ignorance Policy come out to witness Lincoln-Douglas tonight?"

"Hello, Mr. Lo Pat. I'm just checking it out." Invoice is not surprised that Mr. Lo Pat recognizes him. Mr. Lo Pat recognizes everybody, and Invoice is not a stranger to tournament award ceremonies.

"Don't let it go to your head," Mr. Lo Pat says. "Or do, as the case may be." He whirrs off to make contact with the next on his list of divinities. It would not do to let any god go unacknowledged.

"What was all that about you helping with the Vaganza?" Invoice O'Connor asks as Mr. Lo Pat disappears into the now thinning crowd. It is nearly time for the first round to begin.

"Just Mr. Lo Pat extracting his pound of flesh," Lisa says. She takes Invoice's arm. "Let's go to it," she says. "Round one awaits us. You're about to lose your LD virginity."

Invoice O'Connor's round face turns fiery red. Lisa's touch combined with her use of the word virginity is a bit more than he can handle at one time.

You young pup, you...

He Comes In Nightly Like a Beaut

The city is changing its soul. The day is becoming night, and the hive of work is turning into a hive of play, of sleep and of sin.

It is the time that Seth B. Obomash feels at home.

But not tonight.

He is standing in the doorway of a closed delicatessen. Inside, a counterman is doggedly cleaning up so that he can turn off the last light and get home himself. He looks out occasionally at the

large black man outside, but accepts that the man has no business here, and goes about his own business. The sooner he is finished, the sooner he is out of here. An army of black giants eating pretzels, as this one is, wouldn't stop him.

Seth looks at his watch again. Five minutes to seven. He pulls another pretzel out of the bag. It was one thing talking to Mr. Lo Pat about coming, it is another thing altogether to be here. He has not shown in face in forensic circles since what he has come to term the incident. Is he doing the right thing to do so now?

He has no idea.

The last few weeks have been hell for him. Being suspended by Veil was bad enough, but they are being so circumspect about it that he knows that he will eventually be able to teach again, somewhere, but not in the diocese, and probably not in any Catholic school in the western hemisphere. But he will teach again. His infraction against the moral law was not so great that his livelihood is in jeopardy.

But what is his livelihood? Is it teaching? Or is it forensics?

For Seth B. Obomash, the question is surprisingly easy to answer. Teaching is in his head, forensics is in his soul. It's no contest.

Why? He asks himself this over and over. Spending every weekend with teenagers, traveling on buses for endless hours, living on junk food, carrying the standard of a specialized activity that no one on the outside understands, which if it disappeared tomorrow no one on the outside would miss it. While everyone on the inside, the minute they're deprived of it, they are no longer whole.

What is this thing called forensics? What incredibly strong hold does it have on its participants?

If Seth B. Obomash understood that, he would be the master of his own domain. But instead, he is a slave to forensics. Or more specifically, a slave to debate. He is slinking around in the dark tonight, judging Lincoln Douglas, just to get a fix.

There's a monkey on his back.

He takes out another pretzel.

He can't postpone it any longer. He takes a deep breath, pulls himself up straight, and crosses the street toward the Hunted Enchanters. He has watched all the debate gods and the Round Robin-skis gather. The coast should be clear.

It is.

He enters the building and rides up the escalator, and only Kalima Milak and Peter Stallone are in view, sitting behind the ballot table.

Suddenly Mr. Lo Pat is whirring up beside him.

"Good evening, Mr. Obomash."

"Hello." Obomash's usually booming voice is barely a whimper.

"Your ballots are ready." Mr. Lo Pat points toward the table. "I was beginning to think you might not make it."

"I'm here," Obomash says.

Mr. Lo Pat looks up into Seth's eyes. Seth doesn't know what there is to be seen there, but the little man in the wheelchair extends his hand, and Seth takes it in his.

"Good luck, Seth," Mr. Lo Pat says with unusual warmth.

"Thank you," Obomash responds. "I'm going to need it."

Mr. Lo Pat nods. "You certainly are, Seth. You certainly are."

Do debaters and their divinities really like to dance?

Will Amnea Nutmilk do the two-step with Tarnish Jutmoll?

What kind of march does Invoice O'Connor have in mind?

Will Seth B. Obomash bring in da noise and da funk to the OriginalVaganza?

Find out nothing in our next episode: "Tofu: Fubar faux food, or nosh for posh poohbahs?"