



Episode 66

Dialogues

When I Take My Saccharin to Tea

"Miss Milak!"

Kalima Milak can hear Mr. Lo Pat's voice three corridors away on the conference room floor of the Hunted Enchanters Hotel. She grits her teeth and follows the sound.

"Miss Milak!"

She opens the door of room 198. Mr. Lo Pat is sitting at a table, sorting ballots from the Round Robin.

"There you are," he says. "Finally."

"I was down straightening up the judges' lounge. Making sure everything was under control."

"I don't recall putting you in charge of the judges' lounge."

"You didn't, but--"

"Has the person I did put in charge of the lounge passed away unexpectedly?"

"No, but--"

"Then I would advise you to let that person do that person's job, and for you to do your job. Do you have any idea what I'm doing here?"

The obvious answer would be sorting out ballots. But Kalima, who knows a trick question when she hears one, remains silent.

"I am trying to run a tournament," Mr. Lo Pat continues. "And do you think I can run a tournament like this?" He waves his hand over the table in front of him.

Kalima tries to discern the item that is amiss, but is at a loss. "Like what?" she asks.

"Did I not ask you for a cup of coffee?"

"I brought you the coffee two minutes ago," she says, trying to contain her anger. "I went to the judges' lounge, got you the coffee, and I just got back there when you called me."

Mr. Lo Pat stares accusingly at the cardboard cup of coffee on the table in front of him. "Is this the coffee you brought me?"

Kalima glances down at it. Another trick question. "Yes."

"Does it look like coffee to you?"

"Yes."

"You don't see that something is missing?"

Next to the cup are the napkin, the two sugars, a creamer and the stirrer that Kalima brought with the coffee. "Missing?"

Mr. Lo Pat reaches out his hand and lifts the two sugar packets, holding them out odiously between his thumb and forefinger, like a rat pulled from the baby's pabulum. "And this?" he asks menacingly.

"Sugar?" She says the word before she can stop herself. This was obviously the sixty-four dollar trick question Mr. Lo Pat has been waiting for.

"Sugar?" he repeats. He shakes the two little packets for a second, then flings them in Kalima's direction. "Sugar? Do you actually expect me to run my tournament on sugar? I need artificial sweetener, and I need it now. Do you understand me?"

Kalima nods. She understands all too well. Once again, under pressure, real or imagined -- and usually imagined-- her coach has proven to be totally insane.

"I'll get it for you," she says, backing out of the room.

"I've been running the Original Vaganza since before your parents were born." Mr. Lo Pat's eyes are wide and flashing. "First I ran it on saccharin, then on cyclamates, and now on aspartame. Sugar--" the word practically shakes the rafters of the building as Kalima backs out the door-- "will kill you!"

Kalima, as soon as she is out of Mr. Lo Pat's line of sight, leans back against the corridor wall. The man is ranting and raving because she forgot his Sweet and Low, and it's only Tuesday night. What will he be like by Sunday?

She absentmindedly rubs the pseudo-ear hanging around her neck, and wonders how she is going to survive it.

He's Back and She's Mad

"I can't believe the nerve of that man!" Amnea Nutmilk is sitting next to Tarnish Jutmoll on the train heading north out of Manhattan.

"Which man?" Jutmoll asks. In forensics, "the nerve of that man" can cover a lot of territory.

"That Obomash person. I thought he was drummed out of debating."

"He was drummed out of Veil of Ignorance. But they didn't execute him. I don't think Torquemada is the principal there. At least not anymore."

"You're not going to defend the man, are you?"

"No. But I'm not going to condemn him, either. I don't understand what he did, and I certainly don't have or even want all the facts on it. I just let him disappear and that was the end of it."

"But he hasn't disappeared. That's the problem."

Jutmoll nods. "It is a problem," he agrees. "You don't really think much of him, do you?"

"How much am I supposed to think of him? He's a nasty, self-centered sex fiend, for God's sake. The very first time I talked to him about setting up a team at Bisonette he dismissed me as if I were some sort of total idiot, like forensics is only for the chosen few, and nobody had chosen me, so I should get the hell out of there. I assure you, I am not used to being treated that way."

"I'm sure you're not."

"But you were nice to me." She looks Tarnish Jutmoll in the eye. "You were very helpful."

"I don't remember that."

She smiles. "Well, maybe you weren't all that helpful. But you were no Seth Obomash. And you've certainly been helpful tonight, letting me come to the Round Robin with you."

"So what did you think?" he asks.

"Very interesting," she says. "Those kids really know how to debate."

"They're classic," he tells her. "Very orthodox. They present a value, they correctly use criteria to define the value, and their cases are actually about how they would uphold that value through their criteria in support of their side of the resolution. That is exactly what it's all about."

"But all debaters aren't like that. At least not the ones I've heard."

"That's true. But that's what makes these kids Round Robinskis. First, they're good debaters to begin with. But on top of that, they've gone to summer institutes every year since they were freshmen, drinking down orthodoxy at the font, so to speak. That's what national-circuit debating is all about."

"They all seem so serious, though."

"They are serious."

"The local kids seem to have more fun."

"They do. The Round Robinskis aren't in debate for fun. They're like forensic ninja: they're in it for the clever kill."

Amnea laughs. "They did all act like killers," she says.

"They are. I think I prefer our kids. They all like to win, but they won't sell their souls for it."

"You really think the Round Robinskis have sold their souls?"

"Seriously? No, not really. They're too young. They don't have souls worth selling yet. But when the time comes, and this generation is of age, it's the Round Robinskis of today who will be the great political and white-collar criminals of tomorrow. There isn't one student we saw today that I can't imagine in twenty years being subpoenaed in a grand jury investigation of the White House."

"I don't think Clinton will be around for twenty more years," Amnea says.

"But the Clintons of the future will be there. And the Round Robinskis of today will be the Web Hubbells of tomorrow."

"I wouldn't expect you to be so negative. You don't strike me as a negative person."

Jutmoll sighs. "I'm usually not."

"But?"

"Well, I shouldn't say this, but-- You will keep this in confidence, won't you?"

She leans closer to him. "Of course."

"All right. Well, they're probably going to do away with forensics at Nighten Day."

"No!"

"Yes. It's a question of money. As in, there isn't any. The principal has already warned me. Our district is always shooting down school budgets, and apparently, cutting forensics is one way to save a few dollars. It won't be the only thing they cut, but it's the one that hurts me the most."

"They won't... I mean, it won't affect your job, will it? They won't...fire you?"

He shakes his head. "I have tenure. And I am a teacher; I don't only do forensics. That's not the problem. But we have such a long tradition of speech and debate at Nighten Day. I'd hate to see that disappear."

"There's no hope?"

"None that I can see."

She puts her hand on his arm. "I'm sorry," she says. "I really am. I can imagine how this must upset you."

Not as much as her putting her hand on his arm, he would like to say.

But he simply sits there quietly, absorbing her closeness as the train clanks its way to the northern suburbs.

Salome and the Dance of the Seven Veils (of Ignorance)

"So what did you think?" Lisa Torte asks as she eases her purple Dodge Neon into the traffic on the Henry Hudson Parkway. Invoice O'Connor thinks that it is the perfect car for her, and that she must be one of the best drivers he has ever seen.

"About the Round Robin?" Invoice says. "I loved it."

"Lincoln-Douglas isn't so bad after all, is it?"

"They debate like regular people," he says. "I mean, it's obviously different from policy, with the emphasis on philosophy and everything, but I sort of liked that."

"You could get interested in philosophy?"

"I think so. Plus I do know how to debate. That doesn't change all that much."

"But you can't talk fast, like you would in policy," she warns him. "Tonight, the people we saw, that's about as fast as you can safely get."

"I can deal with that."

"You bastard!"

The epithet is aimed not at Invoice, but at a Land Rover that has cut in front of Lisa's Neon. For a moment her expression leads Invoice to believe that she is about to ram the offending vehicle, but within seconds her features settle back to their soft attractiveness.

All right. Maybe she isn't one of the best drivers he has ever seen.

She is really cute, Invoice thinks. Really pretty. And not much older than he is. But, like, from a different world somehow. An older, more mature world, for one thing. An LD world, for another. A world that he would very much like to be a part of.

"So are you going to go for it?" she asks him.

"What?" It takes Invoice a second to return to earthly thoughts.

"Are you going to debate at the Vaganza? As an LDer? I've got you pre-registered."

He takes a deep breath. He's gone this far.

"Yes," he says.

"Great!" She reaches over to pat him on the knee. "I knew you would."

Invoice gulps as her hand touches his leg.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

The Feline Dialectic

He shuts the door of his house behind him.

Home at last.

He sighs as his orange tabby rubs up against his pants leg. "You hungry, Hegel? I know I am."

The cat looks up to the man's extraordinary height and purrs.

"Come on, fella."

The man flips on the lights throughout the house as he heads into the kitchen.

"It wasn't all that bad," he tells the cat. "Nobody said a word."

He reaches into the drawer where he keeps the can opener. The cat jumps up on the counter.

"You know you don't belong here, Hegel."

The cat grunts as the man gently pushes him off the counter. He lands on his feet and immediately jumps back up.

"You are hungry, aren't you? All right, all right. Stay up here, if you must."

The man opens the cabinet where the cat food is stored.

"Of course, tonight really wasn't all that hard, comparatively speaking. Some of the judges, that was one thing. They all know the story. But the Round Robinskis, I mean nothing to them. They're all LDers, after all."

As the man tries to open the can, the cat, purring loudly, presses his nose against the man's hand.

"I hate judging. I really do. Especially LD. Let me open this, will you? Anyhow, the real test will be Friday. When everyone is there in the auditorium. It won't be easy, Hegel. It won't be easy."

He puts the food down on the floor. The cat immediately begins chomping away.

"Now what should I make for myself?" the man wonders aloud. He opens the freezer door. "How about a pot pie?" He pulls one out. "How about two?" He pulls out another.

The cat is back on the counter.

"Finished already, Hegel?"

Hegel rubs his head against Obomash's arm. Obomash pets the cat's head gently.

"Good boy, Hegel. Good boy."

Hegel closes his eyes, reveling in being petted by a loving master.

Will Mr. Lo Pat start wanting Half-and-Half instead of cream?

Will Amnea Nutmilk write a letter to the Times complaining about Obomash's resurrection?

Will Invoice O'Connor dream tonight of Lisa Torte?

Will Hegel find the litter box in time?

Will Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama join forces with Ralph Nader to overthrow the Scientologists?

All this and more is buried irretrievably in our next episode: "Ball Bearings: Metal lubricants or spherical miens?"