



Episode 71

Musical Chairmanship

Three days of peace and love and music, and nothing but peace and love and music.

They've closed the New York Turnpike.
Breakfast in bed for five hundred thousand people.

The brown acid is a bummer, man...
No. Wait a minute. That was Woodstock.

Wrong generation. Except maybe for Seth B. Obomash and Amnea Nutmilk, neither of whom we wish to see skinny dipping in the Aquarian Nation mud flats.

Let's try this.

Frankie.

The Voice.

Ol' Blue Eyes.

The Chairman of the Board.

Whoa! Now that's really the wrong generation. Or is it? Melanie singing "Candle in the Rain" may be as dated as a Milli Vanilli CD, but Frank Sinatra has never gone out of style, not since he stepped behind that first microphone in Hoboken, never for a minute, even in the periods between comebacks and label changes and bum marriages, even interred for the ages.

It's hard to believe that he and Woody Allen were once married to the same woman. At different times, of course. The mind boggles, eh, Mr. Previn?

All right, then. Frank Sinatra. What better way to kick off the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza (All Other Vaganzas are Extra).

We miss you, Frank. *Apres Francis Albert, le drought...*

Well, Maybe this Particular Lady is a Tramp

There are three rounds, in both Policy and LD, on the opening Friday of the Manhattan Lodestone OriginalVaganza. The first two of these are random, while the third is the first of the rounds paired on the basis of the contestants' previous records. This means that while the first two schematics can be created quickly, from the third round on, the computer will have to chug away through all the variables of how people are doing and who has already hit whom, and who is able to judge whom from where. All the previous ballots must be in before the next round can be assigned, and from the third round on, the proceedings move at a stately pace following the peppier execution of the random rounds.

But there is random and there is random. And one aspect of tournaments that should be almost completely random is the assignment of the judges. While there is a feature in the standard tab room software that allows a rating system, so that the most experienced judges are hearing the most difficult rounds -- for example high-point two-two rounds where one student might break and the other can change back into his Phish tee shirt -- even that does not truly make the assignments that much less than accidental, given the numbers of judges and students participating. The odds of hitting a certain judge more than handful of times in a lifetime should be very low.

But the odds don't necessarily work the way we instinctively think they should. Random assignment of judges does not mean that, in a given year, you will randomly work your way through the rotating judge pool until you've been heard by all the judges equally. What random means is that you will end up with a parabolic statistical distribution that translates into being judged by one particular judge more than any other, with all other judges falling into progressively lower frequencies. If you're good at the forensics math, you can no doubt do the numbers yourself.

And Jasmine Maru, much to her horror, is good enough at the forensics math to realize that it's happened again.

As round one nears its end, the schematics are released for the second -- random -- round two. Yeah, right. Random. There's Jasmine on the schematic. And her opponent is certainly random, except that instead of being some easy-to-beat schlub from East Moses, it's a Round Robinski who she knows came in second at CFL Nationals last year. And if that isn't bad enough, she is going to be judged by Mr. Dwindle.

Dwindle, the father of Chip Dwindle from Farnsworth Catholic.

Dwindle, the judge who is at the top of Jasmine's statistical distribution.

Dwindle, the judge who has judged Jasmine sixteen times in three years.

And dropped her sixteen times.

Dwindle.

Aargh!

"What's the matter, Jasmine?" Griot asks. "You look like you're not feeling well." Griot has just walked into the cafeteria from finishing his first round. Jasmine is standing by the door, staring out at nothing.

She holds out the schematic. He takes it from her, and realizes the problem instantly.

"Dwindle," he says flatly.

She nods. "Sixteen times," she says. "And now going on seventeen."

"Shades of Rodgers and Hammerstein," Griot says.

"This isn't funny, Griot."

Griot lowers his eyes. "I know." He shrugs. "Maybe this time he'll pick you up."

"And maybe this time the rain will fall up. He hates me, Griot. You know that."

"He doesn't hate you, Jasmine. I don't think anybody hates you."

"Dwindle hates me. I know it. And look who I'm hitting."

Griot looks at the schematic again, and his eyes widen. He puts his hand on Jasmine's arm. "Don't let it get to you," he says. "If you go in there thinking you're going to lose, then you're going to lose. I know this Robinski, I beat him twice last year. You can beat him this year."

"I'm not you, Griot. And you didn't have Dwindle to contend with."

"I've had plenty of lousy judges, Jasmine. So have you. Lousy judges that have dropped you, lousy judges that have picked you up."

"Dwindle is a lousy judge who's always dropped me. Every time."

"If you're going to have a lousy judge for the next round, so is your opponent. Don't forget that. He's a Round Robinski, which means that he's going to have a fairly complicated case, and I know he's got an attitude the size of Cleveland. And I know Dwindle, who's not all that bright. Dwindle isn't going to like him. You've got to dumb down for Dwindle. That's got to be your slogan for the round."

"I've 'dumbed down for Dwindle' sixteen times."

"Make it seventeen."

Griot's hand is still on Jasmine's arm, and they both realize it at the same time. He pulls it away quickly.

"I'll walk you to your round," he says. "I'm not on till B flight."

"Okay. I'll get my stuff."

She walks away from him over to the Nighten Day table, marked by a pile of backpacks and coats and two or three Mountain Dew bottles.

Griot's eyes devour her every move as she walks.

Keglers in the Night

They do show up all the time, although we haven't paid them much attention so far. It's a long trip for them, but they make it almost every weekend, from their bunkers on Breed's Hill or the Back Bay or the north side, or wherever Massachusettsians gather when they're not at forensics tournaments. Occasionally they have their own festivities, but as often as not they're rubbing elbows with the hoi and the polloi of their more westerly neighbors from New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, at places like the Andrew Johnson or the Lodestone Vaganza. They are easily recognized by their chief characteristic: their indoor-sports habits.

During the dinner break after round two on Friday, Tilde Hyphen-Emdash -- star debater from Algren-on-the-Beach in Massachusetts -- joins her team at their table in the cafeteria. After the usual salutations and comparisons of results so far, plus the odd comment on the cold, chewy Vaganza pizza, she asks about their coach.

"He's lining everything up," one of the junior girls says.

"Any word yet?" Tilde asks.

"There certainly is!" Nip Saso says, coming up behind her.

Nip Saso is the coach of Algren-on-the-Beach. He has a big smile on his face, making him look something like an enlarged leprachaun, with his red hair and bright green eyes.

"Hi, Nips," Tilde says, turning to face him. She is a tall, dark-haired girl, in appearance somewhat resembling Morticia Addams, only slightly more funereal.

"It's still there," he tells her, and the rest of the team. "About five minutes from our hotel. Open all night. Ten pins, of course."

"What's it like?" Tilde asks. "Clientele-wise, I mean."

Nip nods. "They're a good-looking bunch," he says. "Teams, mostly. Leagues. No crack dealers that I could see. We'll be safe."

"Will we be able to get on?"

Nip nods again. "I was able to reserve a lane for eleven o'clock. That should give us plenty of time."

Tilde grimaces. "Eleven? That's going to make it pretty late. We do have to debate tomorrow."

"Are we here to debate, or to bowl?" Nip Saso asks.

The Algren-on-the-Beachers exchange glances, then look up at Nip.

"To bowl!" they reply in one voice.

"Awesome," Nip replies, sitting down and preparing to dive into some of the cold, chewy Vaganza pizza.

If I Can't Make it there, I Can't Make it Anywhere, but at least I Can Audit

The cold autumnal rain has not stopped, nor has its fury. In the old Manhattan Lodestone building, some of the rooms are so solidly sealed from the outside world that they might as well be four walls of solid brick. In other rooms, the window frames rattle steadily from the force of the fierce wind, reminding their inhabitants that there is a world beyond the artificial boundaries of forensics.

Beyond forensics... Do you really think there is such a place, Toto? Where teenagers don't find themselves in classrooms on Friday nights and all day Saturday (and, in the case of the Vaganza, Sunday as well, if they're lucky enough to break. Lucky? Is that good luck?)

Why do they do it, week in and week out? What is the attraction? What is the ineluctable pull?

As Tara Petskin makes her way along the streets of Manhattan, the hood of her yellow slicker over her head, her body hunched over to keep the icy rain out of her face, she has absolutely no answers to those questions. On a miserable Friday night like this she could have rented a video and sat on her warm couch wondering why Gene Siskel put "Kingpin" in his top ten list for 1997. Or read the three chapters of "Bleak House" that her A.P. English teacher has assigned her; is there any greater joy for the counter-Dickensian, short of the death of Little Nell, than Esther's losing bout with the pox and the resulting scarring? Tara could even have gone to bed early to

make up for her sleeplessness the night before. Warm sheets, warm blankets, a soft feathery pillow under one's head... Ah!

But instead, she has taken the train down to Manhattan to watch the Vaganza. She should be arriving just in time for the third Policy round. As she hustles up the outer steps of Lodestone High School she imagines that if she and Invoice were still a team, right now they would be two and oh.

Invoice O'Connor. As she pulls open the outer door of the high school against the wind, she wonders what she will do if she sees him. If? When. She can't she miss him, since she hopes to hitch a ride on the Veil of Ignorance bus home tonight. What will she say? What can she say?

And what about Lisa Torte? What can Tara say to her? She has to say something. And she has to start going to the A.P. Euro class. Any more cuts, and she'll be in trouble.

And there's also the issue of the debate team. If Tara can't have Seth, and she can't have Invoice, she has decided that she can still have debate. Somewhere on Veil's team there's a partner for her, someone unhappy with their present situation who would kill their favorite puppy to get a chance to debate with someone at Tara's level, to become, like her, a Master of the Debate Universe.

"Can I help you?" the guard inside the door asks her.

Tara pulls off her sodden coat and shakes out the gallons of water that are sticking to it.

"I'm just an observer," she says, pulling off her eyeglasses and drying them on the end of her Policy Rules tee shirt. She is momentarily blind without them, so she doesn't notice the guard nodding her admission into the building. But she doesn't expect otherwise. Of course she's here to observe the tournament.

Why else would a teenager in her right mind be out on a night like this?

Was there actually any reason for the Sinatra nonsense at the beginning of this episode?

Will Dwindle pere drop Jasmine for a record seventeenth time?

Will the Algren-on-the-Beach team members break two hundred?

What will Tara say when she runs into Invoice?

And so we bid a fond farewell to our next episode: "Sigmoidoscopy: Belittling test for the terminally decrepit, or a pair of Freudians in Ireland?"