



Episode 98

Seth Went the Strings of My Heart

They meet on neutral ground.

"Hello, Tara."

"Hello, Haircut."

The Veblen Mall is the most neutral ground in the county, and they have arranged to get together in the food court, the absolute hub of mall neutrality. When Tara arrives, Haircut is already there, looking down from the balcony as she rises up the escalator, his intense eyes following her along the row of fast food facades until she notices him. She does not smile in recognition as she nears his table; neither does he.

"Sit down," he says.

She pulls out the chair directly across from him. "Is Seth here yet?"

"I haven't seen him."

"He's probably getting something to eat."

Haircut nods. The idea of Seth B. Obomash getting something to eat is not a hard one for him to accept.

Neither Tara nor Haircut speak for a moment. She regards him through her oversized eyeglasses, her face expressionless. He regards her back with his seemingly constant

intensity. There is a hint of a wispy goatee at the end of his chin.

"I don't see you much anymore," Tara finally says.

"Just in math class."

"And English."

"Yeah. And English."

"How have you been?"

"Good," he says. "Working."

"On your web page?"

"Yeah. You?"

She shrugs. "Writing college essays, mostly. Have you applied anywhere yet."

For the first time he breaks eye contact with her. "I got accepted," he says. "At M.I.T."

She nods. "That's good."

"That's what I wanted. They liked my web site."

"A lot of people have web sites."

"Not like mine. Have you ever seen it?"

She shakes her head. "I'm not much of a surfer," she replies.

"You should be."

"Why?"

"Wave of the future, maybe. Because you can't avoid it. How do you do research, if you don't use the net?"

"I didn't say I don't use it at all. I'm just not as into it as you are."

"You're still into debate, then." He makes it a statement, not a question.

"I try. Except lately I don't have a partner."

"Seth told me that Invoice has switched over to LD. That's wierd."

"The whole idea of LD at Veil is wierd. It's that new coach, Lisa Torte. She's a little wierd, if you ask me."

"She's cute." For the first time, Haircut smiles. It is a knowing, conspiratorial smile.

"She's also LD to the core. She hates Policy with a passion. If she had her way, she'd drop Policy from the team completely."

"That's hard to imagine. There's like forty Policy people at Veil. How many LDers does she have?"

"Just the one. Invoice."

"Then I don't think she's ready to drop Policy yet."

Tara turns and scans the room. "I still don't see Seth anywhere. You want something to eat?"

"I wouldn't mind a Coke."

"Stay here. I'll get it."

She stands up and goes over to the Burger King line. Haircut tries to take his eyes off her, but he can't. He sees her every day, but not close up. He has forgotten how pretty she is, especially her hair, long and thick. He remembers not that long ago, when the two of them were going out--

But that's over now, and he doesn't want to go back there again. Or does he? According to Seth, Tara certainly wants to go back there. But she's given him no indication of this herself.

She returns with a couple of Cokes. He gives her a dollar to pay for his, then they drink silently for a few minutes.

"He's got to be around here somewhere," Tara says. "It's not like Seth to be late for anything."

"He did say four o'clock, didn't he?"

"Four o'clock. We obviously both heard him say the same thing."

"It's wierd, him getting fired and everything," Haircut says. "It's hard to imagine him not being the coach."

"Especially with Lisa Torte in his place." Tara bends over to take a sip of soda through her straw, than straightens herself up. "So let's cut to the chase, Haircut. There's no point beating around the bush."

"You're right," he agrees.

"Seth says you wouldn't mind debating again."

"Seth says you need a partner. He just asked me if I'd be interested."

"Are you?"

"I told him, my web site takes up most of my time."

"So you're not interested, then."

"Well, I could probably make time for it, now that I'm accepted into college. My school load is light at Veil."

"So you are interested."

"Well..." He hesitates. "I'll be honest with you, Tara. I'm not that interested in debate per se. But when Seth said that, well, you were sort of ...still like...well, carrying a torch for, uh, us, I--"

"Carrying a torch!"

"Well, that's what he said."

"You arrogant bastard!" The sparks are flying out in all directions. "As if I would still be carrying a torch for you after all this time. Get real. You know you're just covering up the way you feel about me."

"The way I feel about you?" Haircut's brow furrows. "And how the hell is that?"

"Well, if anyone's carrying a torch, we know it's you."

Haircut jumps out of his chair. "I'm not carrying a damned torch. I'm not carrying a damned match. I'm not even carrying a damned dry twig and a piece of damned string. Mes etoiles!"

Tara looks up at him with narrowed eyes, as he looks down at her with the same palpable distrust. Realization dawns simultaneously in both of them.

"Seth," they say in unison.

Haircut slowly sits down. "There's your arrogant bastard," he says. "Seth told me that you were still interested in me."

"He said the same thing about you."

"He's got some nerve. You've got to hand him that."

"Unbelievable."

"Do you think that's why he didn't show up, because he didn't want us to find him out while he was with us?"

She shakes her head. "I'd bet anything that he was hoping to string us along until NFL nationals in June. The last thing he would have wanted would be for the two of us to get together alone and work things out between us."

"I think you're probably right."

"So now what?"

"Well, that's the question, isn't it? Now what?"

The two of them regard each other over their Cokes.

"No romance?" Haircut asks.

"Not that I know of," Tara replies.

"Just debate?"

"Just debate."

"I've still got my web site. That takes a lot of time and work."

"You already know how to debate, Haircut. All you need to do is get up to speed on the topic."

"You want to debate, so you do get to debate, so that's what's in it for you. But what's in it for me?"

"You thought getting involved with me was in it for you up until a few minutes ago. That seemed to be good enough."

"But you're not in it anymore. I wasn't even sure I wanted you, to tell you the truth."

"You should do so good, Haircut. Who have you been going out with lately? I haven't noticed your picture much in the society pages, if you know what I mean."

"I'll grant you that I've been laying low. But at least I haven't been mooning over some LDer that I've never even gone out with."

"I'm not mooning over him."

"That's not what I heard."

"From who?"

"Does it matter? It's pretty common knowledge. Except, I guess, in one place. He doesn't know about it, does he?"

She looks away.

"He's a smart guy, Tara. But with girls, he's as dense as a Volvo. I don't even know what you see in him. He's not exactly a babe magnet, if you know what I mean."

"He's nice, Haircut. He's very, very nice. That's pretty magnetic all by itself."

"You've really got it bad, haven't you?"

She nods.

"There you are!" Seth B. Obomash is standing over them. "I can't believe what happened," he says. "I had a flat tire. Took me forever to fix it." He pulls out a chair and sits down. "I'm sorry I'm late. I hope you weren't too--"

"Honest with each other?" Haircut suggests.

"Honest?" Seth echoes.

"You know, putting two and two together to figure out how you got us here."

Tara adds, "Telling us both the other one was still interested. That was rotten, Seth."

Seth has his big hands on the table in front of them. Neither hand is holding any food. "It

was rotten," he agrees. "But I had to do it. I had to get the two of you together."

"Why?" Haircut asks.

"Because you were once the best team in the school. You could be the best team in the country."

"We're still people, Seth. We deserve better than lies."

"You're right. So I won't lie anymore. I'm sorry. But I had to do it. I had to get the two of you together again." His eyes dart back and forth between them. "*Are* you together again?"

"I'm game," Tara says. "But Haircut can't figure out what's in it for him."

Seth puts a hand on Haircut's arm. "There's nothing in it for you, Haircut. Nothing. Except one possibility."

"Which is?"

"The chance to be the best. You and Tara. With me helping you."

"We were good before, Seth. I know what that's like. I've been there already."

"You've been good, Haircut. You've been very good. But you've never been the best. There's a difference. Not just good. The best. The very best."

"You used to tell us it wasn't about competition, Seth."

"I used to tell you a lot of things. And for most kids, it isn't about competition. That's true. But for the very good ones, competition is what it's all it's about. Winning. Beating everybody. Standing on that stage holding that trophy while everyone stands up and applauds, your peers acknowledging you as the best. The very best. Victory has a flavor, Haircut, a flavor all its own. When you've tasted the ultimate victory, you'll know it."

"And the ultimate victory is?"

"Nationals. National Champions."

"National Champions," Haircut echoes.

"You can do it. You and Tara. And me. We can do it. The three of us."

"You really think so?"

"I know so."

Haircut hesitates only a second, then puts out his hand. "I'm in."

Tara covers his hand with hers. "Me too."

Seth's two hands clasp both of theirs. "National champions," he says one more time. He looks around the food court. "So," he says, "anybody hungry?"

Are Haircut and Tara really not in love?

Is Seth B. Obomash really hungry?

Is it or isn't it about competition?

Who is Sarah Palin kidding?

If this episode said nothing, you can imagine how little will be said in our nexttravaganza: "Duodenal: Type of ulcer or two of former Vice President Gore's teeth?"