



Episode 67

The Dons' Last Do

Hamlet P. Buglaroni, at the height of what is for him sartorial splendor, is wearing his navy blazer. Mercifully, his grandmother has taken the initiative of purchasing him some new pants, so instead of chinos with enough space between the cuffs and his shoes to graze cattle, he is also wearing neatly pressed gray slacks pulled this morning straight from of the Lands End shipping box and slapped on to the Buglaroni body. He is also wearing his trademark two pairs of socks tucked into his father's borrowed black penny loafers.

Principal Raoul Walsh is shocked at the sight.

"You look like you're all dressed up for a funeral," the man says, peering at the boy through his one good eye.

"I am going to a funeral," Buglaroni replies, handing Dr. Walsh a note from his grandmother.

"Oh." Walsh looks down at the note. "I'm sorry to hear that. Not a family member, I hope."

Buglaroni tilts his head. "Well, yes and no. It's my godfathers that died. I mean, not really my godfathers, as in my godfathers, but they were godfathers. If you know what I mean."

Dr. Walsh looks up from the note. Buglaroni is standing on the other side of his desk in his unwonted finery, the only off-note in his fashion statement being the beat-up old backpack hanging from one shoulder. "No, Hamlet, I haven't the foggiest notion what you mean."

"The Vitellis. Angelo and Domenic. They, like, died. My father sort of works with them, so he wants me to go with him to the funeral."

The eyebrow over Dr. Walsh's black patch rises questioningly. "Your father is affiliated with the Vitellis?"

"He's like, you know, friendly with them. I don't know if he really works for them. He's in the car business."

"That's what I thought." The principal signs the note and hands it back to Buglaroni. "Give it in at the desk."

"Thanks, Doc."

"Please do extend my sympathies to your father, Hamlet."

"I will, Doc."

And Buglaroni is out the door, leaving the principal of Nighten Day to wonder yet again what sort of world some of his students are living in.

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"There he is."

"Holy Mother of Meat Loaf! No wonder they call him the Whale."

The two policemen are sitting in a squad car in front of the Vitelli residence. They have come here not to arrest Vitellis, but to bury them. The village of Port Chester is well aware of the notoriety of these special citizens, and the squad car will lead the procession from the house to the funeral home, from the funeral home to the church, and finally from the church to the graveyard. It will be a long, celebrity-studded day.

"He almost never leaves the house," the first policeman says as slowly, carefully, Don Proscenio Vitelli comes down the front stairs of the house one at a time, hanging tightly to the arm of one of his henchmen.

"I hear he lives in a specially built sex lagoon, and he has all kinds of women brought to him every night and God knows what they do in the water there."

The first policeman shakes his head as he sips coffee from travel mug. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard, Muldoon. I mean, yeah, he does live in the water, that's pretty well known, but I don't think he has mermaids floating around in there with him. I mean, the man is obese. He's like an invalid; they practically have to move him around with a crane. The problem with you is that you've been reading too many Mario Puzo novels."

"He is the godfather now, isn't he?"

"Well, yeah. I guess so."

"All right. There you go. He's probably the biggest criminal in the country."

"Except maybe for Bill Gates."

"Don't be a wiseass," Muldoon says, trying to contain his irritation at his partner. "I mean, who knows what goes on in that house of Vitelli's, other than that we know it probably isn't legal, whatever it is. And here we are, acting as his freakin' bodyguards. Jeeesh!"

"You are so out of it, Muldoon. The Vitellis are practically completely legitimate these days. They're not shooting each other down in the streets of Little Italy anymore, in between cannolis and espressos at the local social club. They're a conglomerate. Very legitimate. All sorts of interests. Electronics, import-export, show business, you name it."

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"Sure I do. It's true."

"They're a bunch of freakin' criminals. Look at 'em!"

Don Proscenio is being helped into the back seat of a custom Mercedes, designed to handle his unusual girth. He is surrounded by half a dozen men looking like forty-year-old versions of the bullies in second grade who used to steal your Snickers bars and stuff Play-Doh in your ears. The women are beginning to come down from the house in a separate group, every one of them dressed in black, looking like a misbegotten masquerade party where everyone decided to come as the dowager Queen Victoria.

"They may look like criminals, Muldoon, but that doesn't make them criminals."

"Start the car," Muldoon says. "You haven't got a freakin' clue about mafiosi. Just drive, and don't talk about it. All right?"

"What an idiot!"

"At least I know a little bit about the world. Start the car, and let's head to the funeral home."

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Proscenio (the Whale) Vitelli sits in the rear seat of his black Mercedes, staring out the window at his home town as he takes one of his rare rides through it.

"Place looks like hell," he says. "Hasn't improved in twenty years."

"It's an old town," Starbuck, his consigliere, replies. Starbuck is sitting up front beside the driver. The Whale has the back seat to himself.

"I should move out of here now," the Whale says. "I've got no more ties to the place. My old man and my brother, this was home for them. Me, I don't give a damn about it."

"Where would you move to?" Starbuck asks.

"I dunno. Maybe California. Would you like to move out to California, Starbuck?"

Starbuck shrugs. "I spend half my time out there anyhow, with the business the way it is. I could handle it."

"Maybe, after the dust settles, I'll think about it."

"You know," Starbuck says, "with your brother gone, you're going to have to get out more. Be seen more. You're going to have to be more public."

"I'm not a public guy. You know that."

"As padrone, you'll have no choice. You've got to be available to people. And I'm going to be honest with you, Proscenio. You can't go on living in your pool surrounded by wise guys. You're a businessman now. A CEO. You've got public relations responsibilities, and you're the only one that can handle them."

"That's what you're for, Starbuck. That's why the family has a consigliere."

"I'm your lawyer, Proscenio. I'm your friend. Your adviser. But you're the man in charge. And you've got to act like you're in charge."

"Are you telling me I haven't been running this family for years now from behind the scenes?"

"I know that, Proscenio. But now you've got to get in front of the scenes." The Mercedes pulls up in front of the funeral home. Starbuck turns and faces the Whale as the driver turns off the engine. "You've got to think of the future, Proscenio. What happens to the business next? What is your line of succession? You have no children of your own. Which one of your nephews will you pick?"

"None of them. They're all weasels."

"You'll have to pick somebody."

"I will pick somebody. But it won't be one of them. Is there going to be any food here at the funeral home?"

Starbuck shakes his head. "We're just picking up the bodies and heading toward the church."

"And I doubt if the church will feed us."

"Excellent doubt, Proscenio."

"It's going to be a long day. I'm tired already."

"We haven't even started yet."

"I know, Starbuck. I know."

**

The Garden of Eden didn't have this many flowers. The Church of Our Lady of Distributive Justice is bedecked with every bloom imaginable in every nook, cranny, nave and apse, from transept to choir loft and back again.

"Help your grandmother," Ham Senior says, prodding his son with his elbow.

Buglaroni holds out his arm, and his grandmother grasps it firmly.

"You're a good-a boy." She looks over at her stepson. "Not like-a some."

"Yes, Grandma."

The church is as packed with people as it is with flowers. The Buglaronis manage to find enough space to squeeze into a pew about two-thirds of the way up the aisle.

"A lot of people," Ham Junior says, after they're settled.

"What did you expect?" Ham Senior whispers. "The Vitellis are important people in this town."

The organ is playing softly in the background, what sounds like "O Solo Mio" transposed to a minor key at half the correct tempo, followed by a similarly funereal "Libiamo." Young Buglaroni, whose knowledge of Italian music ends with the spaghetti-and-meatball scene from "Lady and the Tramp," simply assumes that these are some sort of new-fangled hymns.

After ten minutes, the music stops (during a dirge ad lib of "La Donna E Mobile"). There is some pomp and circumstance in the back of the church. Buglaroni begins to turn his head but his father gives him another elbow-prod.

"Eyes front!"

Eventually the procession begins, two coffins slowly rolled up the aisle by nearly identical teams of very serious looking gentlemen of the Mafia persuasion. Behind them, in a specially designed, large-economy-sized wheelchair, Don Proscenio (the Whale) Vitelli is rolled up behind them, piloted by Starbuck, the Vitelli family consigliere. Three priests, six altar boys (who are in for some sizable tips when this day is over) and two women whose role is dubious at best -- this being a Roman Catholic church -- wait for the procession to reach them at the altar.

Buglaroni is enthralled by the ensuing ceremony. He has never seen a funeral before, much less one as grand as this, a portmanteau ceremony, to paraphrase Humpty Dumpty, a final farewell to not one but two Vitelli Godfathers. Prayers, incense and holy water fly in every direction for nearly an hour, interspersed with tears, wails and Holy Communion. Through it all, the two coffins sit like horizontal Space Odyssey monoliths, fussed over by every manner of cleric and lay person.

Finally the ceremony ends. The two coffins and the overweight Don Proscenio are wheeled back to the rear of the church, but this time, everyone is allowed to watch. Then the procession of mourners begins. Slowly, ponderously, the pews empty one at a time from front to back, and everyone heads toward the rear of the church, where the family of the loved ones has formed a reception line. And as the Buglaronis near this knot of mourning Vitellis, it suddenly occurs to young Hamlet that he is going to have to say something.

But what?

Sorry about your loss?

Sorry about your troubles?

How about them Mets?

Nothing suitably glib comes to mind as they edge nearer and nearer. Finally the clan Buglaroni is face to face with the clan Vitelli, and somehow no one pays any attention whatsoever to Ham Junior, who breathes a sigh of relief--

Until he finds himself immediately standing before Don Proscenio's custom wheelchair.

"Ah, yes," Don Proscenio says. "The debater. The smart kid."

Buglaroni gulps. "Hello." He's got to say something. "Sorry about your godfathers dying."

"Thank you, Ham. How's your debating coming?"

"I'm sort of off for a couple of weeks. I've got to write some new cases."

"You'll be a lawyer someday, like my consigliere, Mr. Starbuck here. Do you know this kid, Starbuck?"

Starbuck, standing behind the wheelchair, shakes his head and smiles. "I'm afraid that I don't."

"Ham Buglaroni, Junior. He's a comer. A debater. A counselor of the future."

"Hello, Ham."

Before Buglaroni can respond, he is jostled by the crowd toward the exit door, and the next thing he knows he is leading his grandmother down the stairs of the church.

"I feel-a so sorry for the family," she is saying.

"They'll survive," Ham Senior says softly as his own family heads back toward their car for the final procession to the church.

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Hans Castorp is stretched out on a chaise longue on the balcony of his hotel room, wrapped in a blanket, looking like an elongated moth in a plaid cocoon. He is watching television, enjoying the outdoors even though the autumn weather is decidedly on the cool side. An injudicious slamming of the door behind him is an indication that his casting director has entered his suite. "Hello, Clavdia."

"Hello, Hans."

The director does not look up at her. He is wearing sun glasses and his usual backwards baseball cap, with his hair neatly distributed over his shoulders. He is nearly supine on his chair.

"I got 'Rent' tickets for tonight, then dinner at Bobby's restaurant," Clavdia says. "Bobby's in town, so we'll meet him there after the show."

"Excellent," Hans says.

"It's cold out here," Clavdia says, wrapping her arms around herself.

"The air is good for the health."

"If you say so. What are you watching?"

"CNN. They've got a live broadcast of the Vitelli funeral."

"Live?"

"What can I say. It's a slow news day."

She cannot see his hands, which are wrapped somewhere within his tightly wound blanket, but he must be holding the remote control, because the TV suddenly clicks off. He turns to her.

"You know, Clavdia, I was thinking."

"What?"

"I was thinking, I would bet not one person in a hundred living today can tell you who Zasu Pitts is. Not one person in a hundred."

"Zasu Pitts? You're probably right."

"It's a shame, isn't it?"

"I can't say I've given it much thought, Hans. What brought that up?"

"I was thinking, here we are in New York, we're going to hire an actor who we're probably going to make a star. For a while, at least, everyone will know his name. But will they know him a generation later? Will he be another Zasu Pitts?" Hans Castorp bites his bottom lip. "Will I be another Von Stroheim? Will they only remember me because I'll act in some movie someday in a small part and the real star will be Kate Winslet, 'I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. Castorp.'"

"Have you been drinking, Hans?"

"I'm bored, Clavdia. I've run out of cigars."

"Have room service find you some, then."

"You know I shouldn't smoke. But temptation is the one thing I can't resist."

"You're like a baby when your little army of trainers isn't surrounding you."

He looks at her plaintively. "You are so right, Clavdia. I'm like a baby even when they are surrounding me. Why am I like that? Why?"

"Your grosses have been too high for too long. A couple of flops and you'd be as normal as a nun."

"Don't say that word, Clavdia."

"Nun?"

"Flops."

She parts him on the top of his head. "I'm going to get myself prettied up. I'll come by to get you around seven. You'll be all right."

"I'll be fine."

"You just turn the funeral back on. That will keep you entertained. Ciao, Hans."

"Ciao, Clavdia."

The unseen hand clicks the TV back on, and as the casting director heads for Eve Arden's, Hans Castorp returns his musings to the ephemeral career of the late, great, Zasu Pitts.

Will Don Proscenio step forward to take the reins of the Vitelli family?

Will Starbuck take his coffee back to the Pequod?

Will Buglaroni wear his new pants to his next debate?

Does Steve Jobs sound more like a robber baron every time he opens his mouth?

Is Eliot Spitzer a Seth B. Obomash wannabe?

If you only knew that our next episode is not really: "Earwigs: Joycean insects, or the worst idea since combing it over the bald spot?"