



Episode 73

Awakenings

Mr. Lo Pat's wheelchair is poised at the top of what appears to be an endless stairway. He has his right hand in his jacket pocket, where he is rolling marbles across his fingers, making a non-stop, irritating clickety-click, clickety-click sound. Kalima Milak is standing behind him, her hands tightly grasping the push handles of his chair, her knuckles turning white from the pressure.

"There were strawberries," he is saying to her. "And now they're missing. Don't contradict me. I am the captain of this ship, and if I say there's strawberries missing, then there's strawberries missing."

Kalima takes a deep breath. "I am not Fred MacMurray, and you are not Humphrey Bogart," she says.

"Excuse me, Miss Milak? I don't understand you."

"Would you believe Richard Widmark?" Her voice cracks as she takes a step backwards, then with a maniacal laugh she heaves forward, pushing the wheelchair down the endless stairway.

"Or maybe the Potemkin?" Mr. Lo Pat calls back to her as he clickety-clicks his way into eternity.

Kalima laughs, and laughs, and laughs. And then she opens her eyes. It is five in the morning. The sun has not yet risen over Staten Island, but her alarm clock is blaring Celine Dion and the theme song from "Titanic."

If that doesn't wake you up, nothing will. Gentlemen, start your penny whistles!

"Turn that crap off," a muffled voice comes from the other bed.

Kalima obliges, as much for her own sake as her groggy foster-sister's, snapping the radio button to the off position. It has done its job, and awakened her; listening to the Canadian Warble-Walrus won't make her any more awake. She has to be at Lodestone by seven-thirty, which leaves her a half an hour to get to the first bus of her journey. She stares at the dark ceiling for a moment, reveling in the fast-fading memory of her night's dream, then pulls her feet around and prepares to start the day, the first of all the Vaganzans to do so.

And thus begins the awakening, the most difficult part of the forensics experience.

Most students live a five-day academic existence. From Monday to Friday they pull themselves out of bed at whatever ungodly hour will allow them to make it to their seats exactly as the first bell rings, and not a moment sooner. No student has ever awakened before the alarm to greet the dawn with pirouettes of sheer glee, or arrived at school an hour early to get a head start on the day, or decided that this morning it would be more fun to walk to school rather than run out to catch the bus just as the driver is turning off the blinking lights and about to pull away. It has never happened, and it never will. The idea runs completely contrary to the physical makeup of the adolescent. While teenagers can stay up forever at night (and that's only in high school; in college they can stay up even later), they simply cannot get out of bed in the morning (while their parents are banging around in the kitchen listening to Celine Dion -- by choice! -- at five a.m., yelling "Rise and shine!" to the rest of the household on the misguided belief that somehow there is a teenager in the world that has ever shone upon rising). When the weekend arrives, the average high school student makes up for the imbalance of internal chemicals that results from too little sleep at all the wrong times during the week by sleeping most of the day Saturday. Maybe then they'll get up around dinner time, take a shower, eat, and go out to see the latest Wes Craven movie ("You've seen it before, now see it again! Teenagers murdered in abundance! What's not to like?"), then back in bed by midnight, and sleep in again on Sunday until there's five minutes less than enough time to complete the weekend's homework before having to go to bed for school the next morning.

But these are average teenagers, not forensicians. Forensics students live a six-, and sometimes even a seven-day academic existence. Sleeping late on weekends is an indulgence in which they seldom partake. Rather than counting on rest and relaxation to recharge their internal batteries, they rely on adrenaline, Mountain Dew, and humming a few bars of "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead." For the most part, the combination works. At eight a.m. on Saturday, when the first weekend round is usually scheduled, as it is today at the OriginalVaganza, the students are all primed, primped and ready to go.

But each has his own way of getting there.

First, there's the primary breed of rise-in-your-own-bedders. Tournament hosts, like Kalima, get to do this, although Kalima's situation is unusual in that she lives two hours away from the school. New York magnet schools attract students from all the boroughs, and some parts of those boroughs are as far-flung as Kalima's foster home at the edge of Staten Island. So commuting is no easy ten-minute jaunt, rolling out of bed and straight into home room. The normal tournament host, however, who is within yellow-bus hailing-distance of the old alma mater, gets to revel in sleeping late on Saturday and still doing the tournament, if sleeping late can be defined as getting up at seven rather than the usual six-thirty. There is, of course, the sleeping situation where students are housed by the host school, but that doesn't apply at a tournament like the Vaganza, where nearly everyone is in a situation like Kalima's, although perhaps not quite as extreme, and the logistics are simply impractical for the host school to provide beds for the guests.

Which brings us to the second breed of rise-in-your-own-bedders, who don't have it quite so easy as tournament hosts. These are the members of the teams that live too close to pay the expense of hotel rooms for the night, but not so close that they are, in fact, close.

To wit:

It is only moments after Kalima's alarm has gone off far to the south that Amnea Nutmilk is shuffling through her Stockwood, New York, kitchen, the soles of her down-at-the-heels slippers slapping against the linoleum. She is a woman with a single thought: coffee. She pulls the bag of Starbucks Colombian beans from the refrigerator, then proceeds to run the water into the pot. Her eye catches the green light of the microwave clock. 5:07. She estimates that they should leave here by six; they will drive into the city, because the trains from Stockwood are few and far between on weekends, and who knows what time they'll get out of there tonight.

Once she has the coffee put up and running, she makes her way to Chesney's room. This is the part of the morning she has been dreading.

She knocks on the door.

No answer.

"Chesney."

No answer.

"Chesney!"

Still no answer.

"CHESNEY!!!" She knocks again, louder this time.

Still no answer.

"Where is that boy?" she mutters, knowing full well that the answer is zonked out from three tough rounds of debate yesterday followed by the long ride home. They didn't make it to bed until one o'clock.

Four hours sleep.

Welcome to the Bahamas.

"Get up, Chesney," she says, walking into his room, stepping over the piles of dirty clothes which both she and her son have agreed to ignore as part of the pact of their living together in reasonable amicability. She puts her hand on his shoulder. He is gurgling slightly, a pacific little snore, and she is momentarily struck with a strong wave of maternalism for her only child. He still looks so young, yet next year he'll be off to college...

"Wake up," she says, gently rocking his shoulder. "We don't have that much time."

"Hnnhphrrrhnn?"

"Get up, Van Winkle. You've had a good four hours. What more do you need?"

"Hohenzollern?"

"I'm going to take my shower. Coffee will be ready in a minute."

"Houynhym," Chesney mutters as he opens his eyes.

"You can sleep in the car on the way down," Amnea says. She turns at the doorway. "Don't go back to sleep now. Are you up?"

"Homonyms," Chesney replies.

"I'll take that as a yes," Amnea says, shutting the door behind her.

Which leaves the final category of sleepers at a tournament like the Vaganza, the hotel animals. We saw them at the Messerschmitt, sleeping in numbers far beyond those expected by the designers of the rooms, draped over beds and chairs and tables and cots (usually every hotel has an allotment of four cots to be shared by the 500 or so forensicians). Most of these, especially at a varsity venue like the Vaganza, are hardened hotel veterans.

But not completely hardened. To wit yet again:

The Miami Robinski went to sleep last night fairly confident that he had racked up a three-oh record, although there was some question about the way his third judge was flowing, at least from the M.R.'s perspective of upside down and twenty yards away. But he knows he beat that girl with a club, and he can't imagine not picking up that ballot.

It was around midnight when the M.R. drifted off into the arms of Morpheus. His roommate is half a Policeman entry, and as they are the only two boys on their team, they get the princely position of solely sharing a room with two beds, a blessing seldom seen on the forensics hotel circuit. The Miamian Policeman headed out of the room last night at about eleven-thirty, to work over his cases with his partner, who also happens to be his girlfriend. Mickey and Mimi are their real names. Mickey is a freckle-faced Irishman with a big, ready smile belying the requisite Samuel Johnson two chips that are nonetheless firmly planted on his shoulders. Mimi is a tiny Cuban girl about half his size, making them one of the cutest forensics couples this side of Nighten Day's Ellie DiBella and Trat Warner. Mimi still has a hint of an accent, which kicks up a few notches when she starts speaking quickly, which can be no small problem for a policeman. Most of the late night work done by Mickey and Mimi is on her enunciation.

Or at least that's what they tell everybody.

In the room at the Hunted Enchanters that the Miami Robinski shares with Mickey the Policeman, the alarm goes off at seven o'clock, plenty of time for showers, doughnuts, and the short walk to Manhattan Lodestone. As the M.R.'s hand reaches out to switch the alarm off, he encounters something large and warm in his bed, the bed that he was supposed to be sharing with nobody -- not nobody, not no how.

He opens his eyes to find Mimi sound asleep, half draped across him on his bed. The M.R. quickly determines that she is only wearing an oversized tee shirt and what appear to be the tiniest, tightest, silver underpants. Mickey, in the other bed, is just as sound asleep as his girlfriend. Alone.

The M.R. cannot help himself. He lurches out of bed with a little scream of, "Oh my God!" He is wearing only boxer shorts, which are printed with Wile E. Coyotes chasing a raft of eternally elusive Roadrunners.

Mimi opens one dark eye. "Huh?"

The M.R. stares at her. Definitely silver underpants.

"What time is it?" Mimi asks.

"Seven o'clock," the M.R. answers.

She rubs her eyes. "I must have fallen asleep." She stands up and yawns, stretching herself into a lopsided pretzel. "You'd better wake up Mickey. We were up, like, forever. I'll see you later."

She goes to the door and walks out into the hallway, back to her own room.

The M.R. shakes his head. "Mes etoiles," he murmurs to himself as he pulls the pillow from under Mickey's sleeping head. As his roommate stirs, he goes into the bathroom.

Awakenings. As the cliché would have it, they are usually rude. And they are definitely the most difficult part of the forensics experience.

But soon they are over, and the second day of the Manhattan Lodestone Original Vaganza can begin in earnest.

Will Kalima get to reenact her dream?

Will Chesney run out of "H" words?

Will the Miami Robinski become a silver underpants fetishist?

Will there be a Vista 09?

Look under the rock of your computer for anything but next week's episode: "Brahma: Hindu mysticism or pure bull?"