



Episode 74

If LA's Such a Lady, Why Are You Here?

Not everyone who will attend Saturday's Vaganza session has risen with the roosters.

"You're still not up?" Clavdia Chauchet asks Hans Castorp. She has used the key he gave her to enter his suite. It is nine a.m., the time they had arranged to meet for breakfast, but as she walks through his sitting room toward the bedroom she can see the director propped up in his king-size bed on half a dozen pillows, staring blankly at his television set. She stands between the bed and the television.

"They have Timers 2 on the hotel video system," he tells her, forlornly trying to look past her large form at the TV set, which is not turned on.

"Oh." Immediately understanding the situation, the casting director comes around and sits on the edge of the bed. She takes Castorp's hand in hers. "You watched it, didn't you?"

He nods. "Three times." He finally looks her in the eye. "I was up all night."

"You know you shouldn't do that, Hans."

"And you know I couldn't resist, Clavdia." He shakes his head. "It's a terrible movie. Really terrible."

"You didn't think it was terrible when you made it."

He shrugs.

"The audiences didn't think it was terrible when you grossed over two hundred million in three months."

"The critics thought it was terrible. They didn't care how much money it made."

"Siskel liked it."

"And Ebert said it bit. It didn't even bite, he said. It barked."

"He didn't exactly say that it barked, Hans. He said he didn't like it as much as Timers. That's not biting, or barking. That's just saying that the first movie was so good that it was hard to match the second time around."

"He gave Timers thumbs down too, Clavdia. He hates me. Ebert hates me."

"Ebert hates everybody."

"No. He just hates me."

"You can't let the critics get to you, Hans. You know that. It's the audiences that matter. And as far as the audiences are concerned, you're the greatest."

He leans back and closes his eyes. He is wearing powder blue silk pajamas, and his long hair is flowing down his shoulders. If he were in black-and-white, he would look like the glamorous heroine of a thirties film, doomed to die a swift but glamorous death in the hero's arms. "I told Jimmy I didn't think a movie about the Titanic was a good idea, Clavdia."

"A lot of people told Jimmy a movie about the Titanic wasn't a good idea."

"But I was more certain than they were. I don't belong in this business, Clavdia. I'm not a director. I'm a phony, and some day they are going to find out about me, and that will be the end of me."

Clavdia Chauchet, who secretly agrees with this sentiment, knows better than to appear to concur with it. Hans Castorp is not the first artiste she has had to humor, and he will no doubt not be the last. She stands up.

"Would you like me to go to the school without you?" she asks. "To scout it out? If you're not up to it, that is."

He opens his eyes. "No," he says. "I've come this far. There's no point in giving up yet." He throws back the bed covers and swings himself around. The pants of his pajamas are knee-length, like Bermuda shorts.

"I'll order up some breakfast from room service," Clavdia says. "You'll feel better after a shower and some food."

"It's New York," Hans says. "That's the problem. New York doesn't agree with me."

"Exactly," Clavdia says, extending her hand and pulling him to his feet. "New York isn't good for anyone. You need Los Angeles air again. Real air that you can sink your teeth into."

"You're right," he says. At the door to the bathroom he turns to face her. "Can we see Rent again tonight?"

"Anything you want, Hans."

"Let's do it, then. That will cheer me up."

"Do you promise not to watch any of your own films on TV again?"

The director almost smiles. "I promise," he says.

"That's the spirit," she tells him. "Now on your way. We've got a big day ahead of us."

Strangers in the Morning

The storm of the night before has passed, leaving in its wake a surprisingly warm, summery morning. It is hard to believe that this is autumn in New York, with its thrill of first-nighting. Or in the case of the OriginalVaganza, second-day debating.

Tara Petskin does not travel to the city with the Veil of Ignorance team. In addition to Invoice O'Connor doing LD, Veil has four Policy entries in the tournament. They went home Friday night, returning this morning at the crack of dawn, and they will do likewise tomorrow, if they're still in the tournament.

If Tara and Invoice were still a team, there would be no question that they would still be in the tournament on Sunday, break day. They might even take the whole thing.

If they were still a team...

By the time Tara, having taken the train, arrives at the school, the first round is nearing an end, and there will be about an hour to kill before the next round begins. Unwilling to go into the building yet, she loiters around out front. As rounds end, the occasional cigarette smoker takes up a position nearby, celebrating the unexpected warmth of the morning with a blast of tobacco. Tara ignores them, staring listlessly up the avenue, her mind filled with disjointed thoughts and images.

"Hello, Tara."

For a moment she hesitates. Then she turns to face him, her eyes small behind her large glasses. "Hello, Seth," she says softly.

"I'm surprised to see you here today," he says to her. He has a cup of coffee in one hand and a Marlboro in the other.

"And I'm surprised to see you. Since when do you smoke?"

He shrugs. "I've started recently. It takes the edge off. And I've got a lot of edges lately."

"Those things will kill you."

"Life kills you, Tara. Free will means you are afforded your own choice of weapons."

They stand silently for a few minutes, the tall man smoking and drinking his coffee, the young woman trying desperately to think of something to say to her former coach and, admit it, her former role model.

"I'm judging Lincoln-Douglas," he says eventually. "Can you believe that?"

"You hate judging."

"And I hate Lincoln-Douglas. A veritable double-play."

"You wouldn't recognize Veil these days. Your replacement is trying to turn it into LD heaven."

"Lisa?"

"Lisa. Miss Torte. She's an LD wienie all the way, and she wants us to start doing it too."

"She can't make you do that, Tara."

"She doesn't make us do anything, Seth. It's just happening. They're trying to teach her policy, but it's pretty impossible. Her heart isn't in it."

"I see that Invoice is doing LD here this weekend."

Tara nods. "Can you believe it? Invoice O'Connor doing LD."

"You're not a team anymore, then, the two of you?"

Tara hesitates before answering. "No," she says finally.

"You don't sound happy about it."

"I'm not happy about it."

"So who are you teamed up with, then, if not Invoice?"

"Nobody."

"What do you mean, nobody? You're going maverick? I didn't think Mr. Lo Pat allowed single Policy entries."

"I'm not going maverick. I'm not going anything."

"You're not debating? Not at all?"

"No."

"You can't let Invoice spoil your debate career, Tara."

"It isn't Invoice who spoiled my debate career, Seth."

Her eyes are hard as they bear down on him. He drops his cigarette to the ground and crushes it with his right foot.

"You blame me," he says. "Don't you?"

Her response is unflinching. "Yes."

"I did whatever I did, but it was totally unrelated to you."

"You were my coach, Seth."

"Yes. And I was also human. I still am. And human beings have their failings. Sometimes it's hard to understand other people's failings, but that doesn't mean they're any worse than our own."

"You want me to forgive you, Seth? Is that it?"

The big man shakes his head. "No. I didn't ask you for forgiveness. And I'm not asking you to understand me. What I'm suggesting you do is move on. Put it behind you. Deal with it." He looks away from her. "That's what I'm trying to do."

"Are you teaching anywhere yet?" she asks him.

He laughs. "That soon? I'm still collecting salary from Veil. It was only a couple of weeks ago, remember. It just feels longer."

"I thought they fired you."

"They have. But they don't want to be too official about it, because I think they're afraid that kicking out the one African-American on the teaching staff, even on a morals charge, could lead to more trouble. So they've merely suspended me permanently, whatever that means. But they will be paying out through the end of my contract, and that goes to the end of the school year."

She thinks about that. "That sounds awfully complicated."

"Jesuitical, according to Mr. Lo Pat. He thinks that priests are somehow the most vicious people on the planet. Maybe he's right."

"I thought it was debate gods who were the most vicious people on the planet."

"Perhaps. They're like priests in their way, only with a different religion."

"So you'll be here all weekend?"

"I'm a hired judge," Seth says. "I'll be here up through finals tomorrow. You?"

"I'll be here."

"So I'll see you then."

"Yeah," Tara says. "I'll see you."

She stands in front of him uncomfortably for a moment, then turns and enters the building. Seth remains behind, watching her disappear.

Witchcraft

"LD schematics!"

The call rings through the cafeteria, resulting in the usual stampede for a copy of the assignments for the next round.

Jasmine Maru pushes her way through the crowd while Griot Goldbaum remains at the Nighten Day table, carefully tucking away his copy of Madame Bovary. Ellie and Trat wait beside him. The Nighten Day ritual requires only one copy of the schematic.

When Jasmine returns she hands Griot the photocopied sheet. He puts it on the table in front of him, shuts his eyes and tilts back his head. The process has begun.

"What is he doing?" Invoice O'Connor asks Lisa Torte. They are sitting at the next table.

"Who?" Lisa asks.

"The chubby kid with the Fu Manchu mustache."

"Oh. You mean Griot. He's skem breaking. The tabbing program makes the assignments in such a way that you can usually tell someone's record if you know how to read the schematic."

Invoice snorts. "That's one thing I like better about policy," he says. "After a round you know if you won or lost. You get a critique, and you know where you stand. It makes life a lot easier." He stares down at his own schematic. "So how am I doing?" he asks.

Lisa leans over his shoulder. "Not bad, I would say. Probably three and one."

"You think so?"

"Almost definitely. Three and one."

Invoice beams. "All right!"

Meanwhile, at the Nighten Day table, Griot opens his eyes. He looks first at Ellie DiBella.

"You're two and two," he tells her. "Your last judge gave you and your opponent both twenty-six points and apparently flipped a coin to choose the winner after you left the room."

Ellie grimaces. "I'm not surprised."

"Trat," Griot continues, "I hate to say it, but you're one and three. Nobody's buying your cases."

"I don't buy my cases," Trat says, mildly disgusted with himself. "I hate this resolution."

Griot turns to Jasmine. He smiles at her, his expression almost wistful. "You're three and one," he tells her. "You won your last round. Twenty-nine points. Your opponent in this round should be easy for you; she's way out of her depth, and her last two judges were parents who shouldn't have picked her up but thought she was cute in a babe-in-the-woods sort of way."

Jasmine shakes her head. "You're amazing, Griot," she says, putting her hand on his.

He blushes, as much as any full-blooded Inuit can blush. "The judges really like the wording of your second aff contention, Jasmine, but your first neg contention is confusing them a little. You might want to take a look at it, maybe sharpen it a bit."

"How can you know all that just from looking at the schematic?" Jasmine asks.

He shrugs. "I know," he says.

"And how are you doing?" she asks him.

He looks down at the floor. "Four and oh."

Jasmine smiles. "You're going to do really well at this tournament, Griot."

"There's three more rounds of prelims, Jasmine. A lot can happen." He stands up and grabs his backpack. "Can I walk you to your round?" he asks her.

She glances down at the schematic. She laughs. "We're going in opposite directions," she says.

"Oh." He looks disappointed. "I should have noticed that. I guess I'm only good at reading between the lines. See you later."

He turns and walks away.

The morning is now in full swing.

Will Hans Castorp recover from last night's overdose of self-knowledge?

Will Tara put Seth's transgressions behind her?

Will Griot ever express his true feelings for Jasmine?

Nobody knows, especially those who have read our next episode: "Chthonic: Macabre word for the macabre, or the boom made by a lispng jet pilot?"