



Episode 94

Any Port in a Storm

Ref #90 There are certain mistakes you don't want to make. In the forensics universe, one of the biggest of these is having too intimate a relationship with demon rum. Or in Lisa Torte's case, demon Budweiser. Or demon Budweiser Light, to be exact.

Lisa's day had ended miserably, with the Veil Policians attacking her for a lack of commitment to their activity. Which, as far as she can see, is not true. Granted, she doesn't completely understand Policy yet, but she has clearly declared her intention to do her best to learn, and she has already worked with the kids to begin her education. All right, she hasn't completely learned it in a week. But neither did they.

Damned kids! She slams an empty beer can on the counter. What the hell do they want, anyhow? She gives them everything she can, everything she has, for God's sake. What more do they want?

She flips the empty can into the sink and opens the refrigerator door to get a fresh one. She knows what they want. They want Seth B. Obomash.

Damned kids...

When the door bell rings she is laying out some crackers and cheese. She hasn't eaten dinner, and she's hungry, but she doesn't have the wherewithal to cook anything. Cooking

means thinking and moving and generally getting involved in something. She'd rather just nibble.

She walks out to the front door and looks through the side window. Invoice O'Connor is standing outside her door, which she opens to let him in.

"Hi, Invoice."

"Hi, Miss Torte."

"Lisa."

"Lisa. Okay."

"You ready?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm ready."

On arriving home this afternoon, Lisa learned that the next LD topic had been released by the NFL. Invoice will be debating the new topic at Venerable Bede, the week after Algren-On-The-Beach. The topic is, Resolved: physician-assisted suicide is morally acceptable. Invoice has come over to night to brainstorm with her on it. Given the situation with the Policians, she felt it would be better if the two of them worked privately for a while.

Lisa indicates that Invoice should make himself comfortable in the living room. A minute later she brings out the crackers and cheese and her beer and a Surge soda for him, and settles herself next to him on the couch.

"So what do you think of the topic?" she asks, looking at him over the top of her beer can as she takes a sip.

"I don't know," he replies as he maneuvers a too-large chunk of cheddar cheese onto a stone wheat thin. "The thing is, I don't know if I can get used to the idea of the topic changing every time you turn around."

"It really doesn't change all that often, Invoice. Only every two months."

"It feels like it's every time you turn around. In Policy, you get a topic and you stick to it. None of this bait-and-switch business."

"Doesn't that get boring?"

"No way."

"But it's the same thing every week, week in and week out."

"It's not the same thing at all. You don't understand. A Policy topic is like a living thing. It grows and evolves and changes shape from week to week. Everybody learns something new about it at every tournament, and they all apply what they learned at the next tournament."

"But it's just the same arguments over and over again."

"No they're not. They're hardly ever the same. Once everybody knows the stock arguments, they're no good anymore. So you have to make up new stock arguments."

"Then they're not stock arguments anymore, are they?"

"Exactly. That's just it. It changes every week." He is stuffing himself with cheese, and he takes a break to chew contentedly.

Lisa watches him. It's amazing, this Invoice. He has the look of animated mash potatoes - she tries to hide her private smile at her inner joke. He does look like mash potatoes, sort of white and lumpy and comfortable.

"I'll be right back," she says, going to the kitchen to retrieve another beer. She has lost count of how many she has had. When she returns to the living room she plops down on the couch with a thump, spilling some beer on her jeans. She doesn't notice.

Invoice O'Connor, she thinks. Human comfort food.

"So," he says, "the topic."

"The topic."

"'Physician-assisted suicide is morally acceptable.' That seems to be a lot different from animal testing."

"It is, one would imagine. Unless it's a pork chop that wants the physician to put him out of his misery."

"So what do you think they're asking?"

She looks at him. They are only two feet apart on the couch.

Human comfort food.

"I mean," he continues, "do you think the issue is meant to be that we're putting the physician at moral risk? Because otherwise he's an innocent third party. A bystander."

"I don't think the physician really has very much to do with it, Invoice." She puts down her beer and attempts to chop off a piece of the cheddar cheese with the blunt-edged cheese knife. Within seconds she clumsily sends a torrent of cheddar chunks flying in every direction.

"Damn!" she says, jumping up. She stalks into the kitchen and comes back in a minute with a Dust Buster. She revs it up and starts vacuuming everything in sight, including Invoice's pants leg.

"Hey!"

"Oops. Sorry."

"Give me that." He takes the machine from her, and proceeds to successfully clean up the mess that she made, and which she was making worse. He hands her back the Dust Buster.

"My hero," she says.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asks her.

"I think I'm feeling too good. That's the problem." She drops back down on the couch. The Dust Buster falls to the floor with a thud. "I really feel terrible, Invoice."

"I thought you felt too good."

"Feeling good. Feeling terrible. It's all the same." She looks at him mournfully. "The Policy kids hate me," she says.

"No they don't."

"Oh yes they do. There's no doubt about it." She lets her head fall back. "What am I going

to do, Invoice?"

"I think you might want to stop drinking, for one thing. You're getting depressed."

"You think I'm drunk, Invoice?"

"Are you?"

She sits up. "Only a little."

"I guess I'd better go."

"I'm not really up to talking about the new topic."

"I didn't think so."

She puts her hand on his arm. "You're very understanding, Invoice."

"Uh, thanks."

She leaves her hand there. "Very understanding."

He pulls away and stands up. "I'm going to go, Miss Torte."

"Lisa."

"Lisa. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"At school."

"Good night, Miss Torte." He is heading for the door.

"Lisa," she repeats as he closes the door behind him. "Lisa."

She sits motionless for a few minutes, then lets her head fall back again. She lifts her legs and stretches herself out on the couch.

"What I really need is a pizza," she mutters, staring at the ceiling. "I need some food in my belly. Some comfort food. I've got to call the pizza guy."

She continues to mutter to herself, staring at the ceiling. Her last word is "Invoice" before she falls into an edgy, dreamless sleep.

Any Storm in a Port

Then again, for some people, demon rum is just the thing.

And so are mistakes.

There are not many places for a person to go in Nighten Township. There is home, there is church, there is the mall, and at that point you've run out of possibilities, unless you also include visiting Aunt Irma at her apartment, which of course means dealing with Aunt Irma's cats and her mysterious girlfriend Emmaline and that omnipresent scent of rotting vegetables which apparently this woman who shares much of your genetic makeup considers to be some sort of perfume. Nighten Township is not known as the Las Vegas of New York. It is not even known as the Podunk of New York. It is simply not known.

But there is one hot spot, a solitary bright dot on the gray landscape of Nighten socializing, a bar called the Craz where there are live bands on weekends and acceptably energetic disk jockeys during the week. The noise level is high enough to drown thought but low enough that shouts will be understood if the distance between the mouth and ear is less than two inches. The bar opens at seven p.m. and stays open until the last drunk is levered into the back seat of the car of some accommodating designated driver. People come, people go. Always the same, nothing ever happens.

No, wait a second. We digress. That's *Grand Hotel*. Louis Stone. *I want to be alone*. Drew Barrymore's grandfather (a gentleman you probably haven't heard of, who was also in show business). But we were talking about the Craz.

Sorry about that.

For Braun Saxon, on the second day of his estrangement from his wife, Brett, there is nowhere else to go. He is still staying at the Cozy Cot, but the small, bleak motel room with its "Free HBO!!!" is driving him insane. After dinner at Macdonalds -- he cannot remember ever actually having a dinner at a fast food restaurant, he cannot even

remember driving past a fast food restaurant after two o'clock in the afternoon, so he was surprised to see the place jumping with the same teenagers and young families that always seem to be enjoying the food -- he has driven around in his car for over an hour, going nowhere, exploring the aimless back roads of Nighten Township that circle endlessly into themselves, the welcoming lights on the entry paths to most of the houses, the blue glow of television sets and the bobbing of heads at dinner tables and the couples walking their dogs and the more industrious kitschmeisters tinkering with their Halloween decorations. When did Halloween decorations become so popular, Braun wonders. He and Brett never decorated for Halloween. They would keep the front light on and buy a few bags of those Lilliputian Snickers bars that nowadays masquerade as the real thing, but they never laid out twenty or thirty tombstones or herded together a menagerie of ghosts and goblins or strung up endless orange Christmas lights. Although, of course, if they're orange...

When he saw the Craz on the road ahead, it took no time at all to decide to drop in. One beer. That would be all. One beer.

It is eight thirty when Braun enters the Craz. The outside of the building is plain, a simple rectangle with a neon sign. The inside is no less plain, but a lot more hectic. The bar is on the far side away from the entrance. Between the bar and the entrance is a forest of tables and chairs and a small dance floor. Both the forest and the dance floor are well inhabited, although on a week night like this, not as thick with elves and ents and hobbits as on a weekend. Beyond them, the bar beckons with more neon, plus the action of the bartenders ministering to the seriously thirsty.

One drink, Braun tells himself. Just to put Brett out of him mind. One drink.

He works his way to the bar. There are no free seats, but there is enough space for him to put his foot up on the rail and lean on the bar and order himself a pina colada.

A pina colada? In the autumn? A man alone?

Oh, well. It is demon rum. And to Braun's thinking, he could easily buy himself a sixpack and drink himself into oblivion back in his room, if that was what he was looking for. But no, this is a night out. Enjoy it. Rum. Coconut. The balmy breezes of the Caribbean.

Ahhhh.

Braun turns around and leans with his back against the bar. The crowd tonight is young, as always. Younger even than Braun, mostly at the turn of legal. At least the women, anyhow. The guys look a little older, but not much. Everyone has that work look, suits, happy hour, detox from the real world. The music is steady, Braun has no idea what it is, just beat, rhythm, tempo, BAH -- bah bah bah bah, BAH -- bah bah bah bah. Braun

begins to sway along with it.

The thing is, it's evolution.

The pina colada is loosening his mind.

Evolution. Men and women. They don't think the same. Evolution.

That one is cute. With the short dark hair. Oh, yeah.

Evolution. The genes want to do whatever it is that indirectly results in their reproduction. Or something like that. Braun does not claim to understand genetics, but he thinks it works like this, that genes do whatever it is that genes do, without thinking about future generations, but the genes that are successful are the ones who, by doing what it is they want to do for the moment, also end up reproducing. Natural selection is not for the future, but for the present. The future becomes a bonus.

He signals the bartender for another drink. This time he'll savor it. He drank the last one like soda pop.

The human male is capable of reproducing with a virtually unlimited number of woman at the same time. The female, on the other hand, is pretty much tied to having one baby at a time. So while it behooves males to seek multiple mates to ensure their genetic success, it behooves females to seek one single mate. Males are polygamous by nature, while females are monogamous. It is through this part of their nature, seeking the "what it wants" of the present, that the genes indirectly ensure their reproductive success.

Braun was not being bad or immoral by seeking other female companionship. He was merely being male.

Can't blame him for that, now, can you?

A lot of the women are starting to look cute to him. Maybe they even are cute, or maybe it's the demon rum. He *is* single now, isn't he? At least, in a manner of speaking.

Of course, Braun is not drunk. He has not had that much to drink. But by the very act of entering this place, he has let down his mental defenses. He has put himself at risk to fuzzy thinking and unrelated events and bizarre outcomes of normal actions.

This has happened before. When Brett went to the Yucatan. Braun had come to this very bar. He had even had a couple of pina coladas. And he had turned around, and there was this gorgeous blonde. Cartier Diamond.

And tonight, as Braun finishes his second pina colada, he turns around again.

And there is this gorgeous blonde.

And again, it is Cartier Diamond.

Braun's jaw drops.

"Hi, Braun," she says in that sweet, soft voice of hers.

"Cartier." She is the last person in the world he expected to see tonight.

She looks at him. He looks back. For a long moment, neither of them speaks.

"So," she says finally, "are you going to buy a girl a drink?"

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Mes etoiles...

Will Lisa Torte find herself on the wrong end of a morals charge?

Will Seth B. Obomash have the last laugh on Veil of Ignorance?

Will Braun make the same mistake again with Cartier?

Are men really turned into quivering masses of humanity by the very sight of Sarah Palin?

Find out in our next episode: "Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, Or, I'm just Biden my time."