



Series 2

Episode 17

If This is NYPD, I'm Moving to Peoria

Geronimo Botch hated running a cold case. Most of the time nothing ever came of it. You poked around in the past, found out that those who had been there at the time had known what they were doing, and that this particular perp really was one of the few who actually got away with it. But the Chief wanted Botch and his partner doing archaeology, and what the Chief wanted, the Chief got. What Botch wanted didn't matter in the least.

“That is one trip to nowhere,” Joe Wednesday said as he plopped down into his chair next to Botch. The two of them stared at the white board.

“To nowhere and back,” Botch agreed.

They had sketched out the case on the six-by-six board. In the very center was a photograph of the victim, a man named Lo Pat. It was a photo from the crime scene, and the old man was sitting with a samurai sword pinning

into his wheelchair. His grocery bag with the eponymous Halibut Helper was still in his lap.

On the left side of the board were photos of the people who might be motivated to eliminate Mr. Lo Pat for past grievances. Lines were drawn below the vic's photo to the evidence trail, but the antiques shop that had sold the sword had no line to any of the suspects. On the right side of the grotesque photo of the former debate coach of Manhattan Lodestone (a magnet school) were the people who might benefit from Mr. Lo Pat's death, distinct from those who simply hated him enough to want him to die.

"Let's run through it again," Botch muttered, wanting nothing less than to run through it again. But they might have missed something, and continuously poring over the evidence and talking it out was the only way to find that elusive pointer to what had really happened that day so many years ago.

"He came out of the supermarket at approximately six forty-five on a Sunday evening," Wednesday began. "It was early June, so it was still plenty light out, and Greenwich Avenue was the usual weekend busy. He was in his wheelchair, of course. Motorized. Story is that he whirred around in his chair everywhere without a hitch. Very capable of getting around, in other words, despite his handicap."

"Which was?"

"Some sort of accident from a long time ago. Not a birth thing."

"Anything there?"

Wednesday shook his head. “No. Old news. No connection.”

“Too bad.”

“So he’s driving down the street with his dinner, and the next thing you know, there’s a sword sticking out of him and his wheelchair is still running until it goes off the curb directly into a Mr. Softee truck.”

“And nobody saw a thing?”

“If the perp had been a real samurai, he probably would have cut the vic’s head off, which would have meant a lot of hoo-ha swinging the sword around. But just piercing him like that? You walk by, you pierce, you keep walking. Everybody else is minding their own business, eating their pizza slice, scooping up after the mutt, planning what movie to rent—nobody sees a thing until the chair runs into some guy waiting for his vanilla-chocolate twist cone from Mr. Softee.”

“It would take a lot of strength to stab somebody like that, just once, and have it take.”

“No question. This wasn’t some old granny on the warpath. This was somebody with good upper body strength.”

“Somebody who either wanted to kill this guy, or somebody who wanted to kill just any guy.”

“By the time they reached the end of the investigation they thought that just somebody wanting to kill just any guy made the most sense. Except that would have meant that the perp would kill again, become known as the Samurai Sword Killer or something like that. But it never

happened. The crime was never repeated. At least not this M.O., or anything like it.”

“So instead of it being the Samurai Sword Killer, it was the Halibut Helper Murder.” Botch shook his head. “Jeesh.”

Wednesday stood up and walked to the board.

“We tracked the sword to a place called Quilp’s, a discount antiques shop in the Village. This place is a zoo. You think antiques are hoity toity, a couple of rich shoppers now and then, but this is more like a WalMart for old crap. And definitely crap. A good samurai sword would start at maybe five or six hundred, and the sky’s the limit from that point, but a piece of crap like this one, the murder weapon, it was a hundred twenty nine bucks, plus tax.”

“They remembered selling it.”

“Nope. It would be like remembering who bought the hot dog at Yankee stadium. Whoever it was paid cash, and nobody thought twice about it. Plus the salesman was blind.”

“A blind antiques salesman?”

Wednesday looked at his notes. “That’s what it says. A guy named Zatoichi.”

“How does he know what he’s selling if he can’t see it.”

“Beats me. Maybe his hearing is really good or something.”

“And he didn’t recall seeing—hearing—anything special about the buyer?”

“If it had been a real sword, maybe he would have noticed.”

“So it’s not a real samurai sword?”

“Not an antique, no. Just tricked up like one. They manufacture them in Sheboygan.”

“But we know that this one was sold at Quilp’s?”

“Still had the price tag on it, actually.”

“As if the perp deliberately wanted us to know where he got the sword.”

“Probably,” Wednesday agreed. “Whoever it was knew they wouldn’t be traced, so they didn’t care. Maybe he wanted us to know we’d be wasting our time trying to track him down. We think the perp actually bought it the day of the murder, but we’re not a hundred percent sure. That would mean the perp bought the sword, wandered over to Greenwich Avenue, saw the vic, pulled the sword out of the bag and let him have it.”

“And then disappeared without a trace.”

“And without a witness.”

“So if this Lo Pat guy was definitely the target, the perp knew enough about him to buy the murder weapon on the day of the murder and track him down just like that to where he lives, or at least where he shops for his halibut.”

“That’s what it looks like,” Wednesday agreed.

“And those are the suspects?” Botch asked, nodding toward the left side of the board. “They’re a pretty grim looking group.”

“They’re all debate coaches,” Wednesday explained.

“That would explain it,” Botch said. “Show me a group of debate coaches and I’ll show a breeding ground for every crime under the sun.”

Wednesday shrugged. “Granted they’re not exactly the home team from Attica. But you’d be surprised how much venom these people have for each other.”

“Aren’t they all just high school teachers?” Botch asked.

“Like that makes them some sort of saints? This whole high school debate business is a jungle. There’s only so many trophies out there, and for these people, their jobs depend on winning those trophies. The old interview reports don’t show any altruism here. Nobody’s in it to educate the kids. These coaches are sharks, every last one of them.”

“Why’s that one crossed out?” Botch pointed.

“The nun? That’s Sister Levi al-Chaim. She was considered Lo Pat’s greatest enemy. They actually came to blows once during a tournament award ceremony.”

“The guy in the wheelchair had a fistfight with a nun?”

“I told you, these people are sharks.”

“She looks older than God. You crossed her out because she was too frail to commit the crime?”

“Definitely too frail: she was already dead at the time. Everybody liked her for the murder at the beginning, but, being of the deceased persuasion, she had a pretty good alibi.”

“Who else you got there?”

The next picture down was a large, formidable looking woman.

“This one’s name—” Wednesday looked at his notes —“is Alida Devans. Used to teach out at Brooklyn

Behemoth. Now retired. Another solid rival to Lo Pat, probably one of the few women in the activity physically capable of running a sword through somebody.”

“And?”

“And there was nothing to tie her to the crime, and nothing to clear her. The hit took place a week after one of their big debate events, the NFL nationals.”

“They play football?”

“Not that NFL. The other NFL. The Non-Catholic Forensic League. This was their nationals, which they call NatNats—National Nationals.”

“So the season was over, in other words?”

“Yep. Everybody was home licking their wounds. But Pat’s team and Devans’s teams did about equally well, so it’s hard to see anything there. Their schools have always been rivals, in everything, since they’re both magnet schools with a lot of smart kids who think that whoever goes to the other school was too dumb to get into their school, but it’s been like that since the Millard Fillmore administration. No evidence of any triggering event to murder the competition this particular weekend.”

“And the others?” There were still more pictures.

“Less likely, but all debate coaches. Nip Sazo, Dan Ryan, Tarnish Jutmoll, Renate Screeds. All rivals, but no evidence one way or the other.”

“All still in the business?”

Wednesday nodded. “We should probably start with them.”

“Sounds good. What about the other side?”

Wednesday walked to the other side of the board. “What we wanted to come up with is a list of who would gain if Lo Pat was out of the picture. There was really only one.” He pointed to the top picture on the right, a young African-American man dressed in dark jacket and turtleneck. “This is Ola Tse, former debater at Lodestone. He was the one who took over immediately after Lo Pat’s murder.”

“The job was so great someone would kill for it?”

“Doesn’t look it from our perspective, but to these debate people, Lodestone is about as good as it gets. This guy Tse was a hedge fund investor who gave up his day job to run this debate team. Go figure. He was making seven figures and went down to a starter’s salary as a substitute teacher. He used to light his cigars with hundred dollar bills. With his new salary, he’d be lucky if he could afford a pack of cigarettes. But I guess the prestige was worth it.”

“He still running the team?”

“He left after a couple of years. I’m not sure why. Then this guy took over.” He pointed to the second picture. “Joe Gazzola.”

“Isn’t that a real name of a real person?”

Wednesday checked his notes. “Yes,” he said.

“This is fiction. We can’t have real people here.”

Wednesday took the picture off the board. “Don’t look at me. I don’t write this stuff. Anyhow, this guy wasn’t really a debate coach, otherwise his name would be an anagram. He took over for a while and kept the thing together, but it really wasn’t his cup of tea.”

“So you’re saying it’s all right to take him off the board because he’s not really a suspect.”

“Right. He didn’t really want the job, so he wasn’t exactly likely to kill for it.”

“So who’s the last one?” Botch asked, pointing to the final photograph.

“Name’s Halefoil Cumcut.”

“Kumquat?”

“Cumcut. He’s the coach now. Took over a year or two ago.”

“That puts him a couple of years out of the picture for killing the guy to take over his job. Pretty unlikely.”

“Unlikely, yes. But he’s all we’ve got left at the school itself. So we should keep him for now.”

“What about kids? Students? This Lo Pat probably wasn’t a saint. There must have been kids who hated him, kids he flunked, things like that.”

Wednesday shook his head. “His competition at other schools may not have thought too highly of him, but as far as his kids were concerned, he walked on water. Or, I guess, wheelchaired on water would be a better way to put it. He was a god to them. A debate god. He could do no wrong, even when he did wrong. By being on his team, they all got into Ivy League colleges. There were plenty of kids interviewed at the time, but the tecs didn’t like any of the kids for it. Plus it just didn’t seem like the kind of crime a high school kid would pull off. It was mean, and it was premeditated, and it required testicles of steel. Not what you get from a high school kid.”

“You’re right. A high school kid’ll pop you with a forty-five as soon as look at you, but they don’t usually run people through with swords.”

“Well, that’s it, isn’t it?” Wednesday asked. “Nobody is exactly well known for running people through with swords. Which is why the case is as cold as it is, what, six or seven years later.” He waved at the left side of the board. “Your best suspects over here are all on Social Security now or close to it. And they never got anything on this Ola Tse guy back in the day, not so much as a hint that he could have done it.”

Botch sighed. “But the thing is, they didn’t have a hint on *anyone* that could have done it.”

Wednesday dropped back into his chair. “Nope,” he agreed. “They didn’t have a hint.”

“And now they are us,” Botch said.

“And we still got nothing.”

The two men sat there staring at the board.

“Somebody killed the son of a bitch,” Botch said.

“If it’s one of this butch batch, Botch, it’ll be a bitch to catch him.”

Botch looked at his partner. “If you ever utter a sentence like that again, I’m going to have to kill you with my bare hands.”

“You betcha, Botch,” Wednesday said.

The two men went back to staring at the board. One thing, and one thing only, was clear. Someone had murdered Mr. Lo Pat.

The rest was anybody’s guess.

Will Botch and Wednesday solve the cold Halibut Helper Murder case?

Did one of Mr. Lo Pat's rivals cut him down in the prime of life, so to speak, although he was pretty old at the time?

Was the culprit someone at Manhattan Lodestone (a magnet school) who wanted his job?

Was Mr. Lo Pat's murder a really well planned suicide?

Does anyone else want to move next door to Sarah Palin?

We haven't got a clue if the answer is in our next episode: "How to cap an oil spill in five easy lessons, or, I wonder if the Exxon Valdez guys are sore now that their record has been broken?"