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The Milkman of St. Gaff's



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St. Gaff's Island



1. The Mission

Call me Howie. I'm a milkman here on the island of St. Gaff's. In case you don't know, St. Gaff's is an island about a hundred miles from the mainland. I didn't exactly come here to avoid the war. Though it sounded awful with all those trenches and barbed wire. There are other reasons, that maybe aren't fit to tell about right off.

My first thought when I arrived was to work at the new shipyard. But it looked like awfully hard work. So I popped into the milk receiving station and asked if they needed a hand. Now, strictly speaking, as a man of fighting age from Mingsbight, I wasn't really allowed to work as a milkman on St. Gaff's. But I can be pretty resourceful when there's a need to be. So I got my uniform, my white badge, and I was off delivering milk in no time.

I'd only been a milkman a couple of weeks when I did my first interrogation. It was a failure. I'd never had to question anyone before. Certainly it wasn't part of the job description when I joined up. I had not a clue what kind of a mess I was getting myself into.

You might be wondering why a milkman was interrogating one of his customers. It all had to do with the new boss, Mr. Corwin. The story really begins when Corwin arrived. I don't know why they didn't pick him out to be a general, or the commander of the whole army for that matter. He was a tall man, thin. If you were on his good side, you knew nothing could touch you. And if you weren't, well, you'll hear soon enough. He's the one who made me see that being a milkman wasn't just some job. It was a calling. A vocation. And crucial to the war effort.

When he first came to the island with his two huge assistants, Frank and Beaver, he gave a speech to the whole organization. All the milkmen. He dressed in a white milkman's uniform, even though he didn't do deliveries anymore. The only difference was his gold badge.

I remember him clear as day standing up at the podium and delivering an astonishing speech.

"My job here is a simple one," he said. "Oversee the installation of the electric thermolizer, and with it, wrestle the bacteria count in our milk down to absolutely zero. We shall also safeguard the uninterrupted delivery of milk to the rapidly expanding population of St. Gaff's. In so doing, we will uphold a cornerstone of our culture, our heritage, our civilization. There has been talk of resorting to powdered milk for the duration of this struggle. This is the talk of cowards, of the fearful, of the defeated. And I will not hear of it.

"The wife at home baking a cake for her tot's birthday. The cream in your father's coffee while he reads his morning paper. This is what our men are fighting for. Our enemy here in this receiving plant, as it is further afield in the plains beyond Mingsbight, is vermin. Flies. And just as microscopic bugs pose an ever-present threat to our milk supply, so does the disease of subversion and loose talk pose a constant invisible threat to the war effort.

"And that is why I must ask you now to go above and beyond your station. Milkmen are everywhere. We see and hear more than the ordinary citizen can imagine. I'm not asking you to spy on your friends and neighbours, but if you do see something, or hear something out of the ordinary, bring it to our attention.

"This I vow to you. Our milk will be the purest in the realm. And I want each and every one of you to remember. To the milkman who is pure at heart, all things are pure."

It was quite a speech.

And there I was on my way to see Travis the fisherman. My truck rattled away over the coast road. The red moon was still up. The fisherman's cottage was about 5 miles out of town. A muskrat waddled across the road. I aimed the truck right at it, wondering what kind of a sound it would make if I ran it over. The little blighter wasn't moving too quickly, but I veered away at the last second.

The engine nearly stalled going up the one hill on the way to the fisherman's cottage. The truck was heavy with all that milk. As the motor groaned, it dawned on me: if this contraption breaks down out here at this hour, the whole lot will spoil and there'll be hell to pay. There was ice in the truck to keep the product cool, but it'd melt mighty quick when the sun came up. Even though it was only springtime.

But the engine held and I had a few moments to look out over the sea and the crimson stars. The stars used to be white up to about three years ago when they turned red. No one quite knows why. The scientists say it must be some dust from somewhere. An electrical disturbance. Or a really big sinkhole, maybe. For me, I didn't care. It was a moment of peace and quiet and I thought to myself that from now on, I'd always visit Travis first instead of last. City boys like me don't get a chance to see the stars much. Specially if you're from the factory part of Mingsbight. After a few weeks on the island, maybe some of the smoke and soot had gotten out of my lungs.

I was shaken from my reverie when I saw a dog standing on the side of the road staring at me. Like a Doberman. Black. Didn't even flinch as I drove by. He looked mangy. Hungry, with weird red eyes. I didn't know there were wild dogs on St. Gaff's. I looked back a couple times and he was just standing there. Maybe I was just seeing things.

I came around the bend and caught sight of the pastel blue house, though it looked almost black in the red moonlight. I didn't have the milk truck's headlamp on since I forgot to fill it with oil. The boss says we'll get electric lamps soon.

I arrived earlier than usual. That's what surprised him. There was old Travis, standing on the edge of the sea with a spyglass and a lantern at his feet. He heard the motor and jumped. He put the spyglass under his coat and picked up the lantern, as if nothing had happened.

He came walking towards me with a big grin on his face as I hopped out. Travis had a full black beard, sharp blue eyes you couldn't look away from.

"Morning Howie, you're out early."

"I sure am, Travis. Just changing up the route. Thought I'd visit you first. Two bottles, then?"

"Two bottles it is, Howie."

I went back and got the bottles. And then I remembered what the Corwin had said: Watch out for any suspicious activity. You never know who might be a subversive. Even someone who seems like a good fellow might be up to no good. Travis seemed decent enough. He had a nice young daughter, Naomi, and mostly kept to himself. No wife that I ever heard of. His house was the furthest from town and I got stuck with his route. No seniority. But I thought to myself as I got those bottles out. Might he be signalling some enemy craft out at sea with that lantern? And what a hero I'd be if I uncovered such a foul conspiracy.

"Oh, Travis. I had a bit of a question for you if you don't mind too much."

"What is it Howie?"

I got out my notebook and the pencil. I opened to the first blank page. Then I thought my writing might make him suspicious, so I put the notebook away again. I decided to sound casual. Put the man at ease.

“Were you watching for someone out there at sea, Travis?”

“No, Howie. Just an old fisherman’s habit. Looking out for the weather, whales, dolphins and suchlike.”

The old codger was one step ahead of me.

“And the lantern, Travis? Was that to signal someone? Someone on a ship, maybe?”

“No, Howie. It’s before dawn and I didn’t want to trip and fall on the rocks out here. You’re a mighty curious lad, aren’t you?”

He was on to me. Time to think fast.

“Have you caught any good fish lately?”

“Why no, Howie, I haven’t. I haven’t been fishing at all these past six months. No one has. All us fishermen are working at the shipyard now, what with the war.”

“That’s true, that’s true.”

He had me there. A light came on in the upstairs of the cottage. Travis saw it too. Someone appeared in the window, but I couldn’t see who.

“Looks like Naomi’s up. Anything else I can do for you, Howie?”

Travis was looking right at me with those clear blue eyes. The horizon was pink now. Dawn was about to break and I thought maybe I’d stayed there too long. I could see the girl’s silhouette in the window...watching us.

I heard something scurry under the truck. The sound shook me from my thoughts. For such a rocky barren island, there sure was a lot of wildlife.

“Howie?”

“No, Travis, I’d better get going.”

“Be seeing you!”

And with that he walked back up to the cottage, the lantern lighting his way back home.

I made up my mind then and there to keep a careful watch on Travis from here on out, decent fellow or not. I wouldn’t report anything now. I’d gather information. Get him talking. He wouldn’t trap me like that again.

I turned the crank on the truck and got it started. But as it got out onto the coast road it was making a funny sound. I heard a tittering, like a child laughing. The engine started making especially odd sounds just as I crested the hill. Then, it stopped.

The truck rolled down the hill and I put on the brakes. I got out. It was lighter now. I opened the hood. But who was I fooling. I wouldn’t know a tappet from a tie rod. I tried the hand crank again, but the blasted thing was dead. It was going to be a long walk back. Maybe four more miles into town. If I didn’t get back fast enough, I’d lose the whole truckload of milk and surely my job as well.

I looked out over the island to see if anyone was about. I hadn’t been on this island but a few weeks. St Gaff’s was far from the mainland, like I said. Mostly barren. There was some pastureland in the middle, they say, but I’d never seen it. Where I was there was nothing but rock and the road into town. What did catch my eye, a few feet up the road, perched on a rock was a stone gargoyle, maybe a foot tall, scowling at me. I stared at the thing for a moment, transfixed. I just couldn’t seem to look away, and the gargoyle didn’t move either. The sun was just showing itself over the horizon. I squinted, and thought I saw the gargoyle move. Was it smiling at me? I stared into its eyes and I could feel that it was happening again. I’d told myself that getting out of Mingsbight might stop it, even though I knew it wouldn’t.

The ground was getting so soft, my feet, sinking...sinking. I fell beneath the ground and the rocks, pulled through the very earth and sucked out into the deep green sea, pulled down deep, the surface began to blur. I kicked, I struggled, but I'd never make it back up without drowning. My hands grasped at water. I was still sinking.

I knew some vast creature would be waiting for me down there. But, among the rocks on the bottom, I saw my mother at the kitchen table serving tea. I sank down down and couldn't stop it. And he was there, too. Across from my mother, sitting at the table, bloated. That face. Eyes turned to green jelly. His lower jaw gone now. The upper teeth, grinning. Accusing. His head lolled back with the current as he looked right at me. The pit of my stomach gave way. I tried to scream, to say something to him, and felt my teeth falling away. I watched them float off in a haze of blood. I could see nothing through the bloody water but huge dark shapes moving towards me. I sucked deep and felt the water fill my lungs.

I thrashed and pushed hard as I could to get away from them. I was in thick weeds. Clawing through. I pushed an armful of the thick green stuff away in the water and came face to face with the Doberman, the dog from the road, eyes red. Snapping at me. The dog's face grotesque in the water with its teeth exposed. I pushed as hard as I could to get up, to get to the surface.

I felt a rough hand on my shoulder, shaking me. It was Travis. I was standing beside the truck again. The sun was up. I was soaking wet.

"Howie? Howie? You all right there lad?"

Travis always walked to work and back. I felt something in my mouth. I touched it with my tongue and could feel that I'd chipped a tooth. I spat the piece out.

"That gargoyle."

I pointed and Travis chuckled a bit.

“My daughter Naomi put that there. Said it would ward off bad spirits. Didn’t give you a fright there did it? Did you take a dip in the ocean, Howie?”

I couldn’t tell him what I’d seen, of course.

“No I just get the sweats sometimes. I...the truck’s broken down and I’ve got to get this milk into town before it spoils. The boss’ll have my guts for garters.”

“You just have a seat inside there and try to stop shaking. I’ll have a look at the motor.”

As luck would have it, Travis knew a thing or two about motorcars, despite not owning one himself. Something had come loose and it was just a matter of screwing it back on. I gave him a lift into town. Perhaps I was wrong about Travis. I’d have to ponder the matter.

As we drove, I looked out over the sea and wondered how it knew so much. And when it would pull me in again.

In town, we rode past all the row houses they’d slapped together for the new workers at the shipyard. By now they were in the deep shadow of the ship they were working on. A huge wooden warship. Her hull, even just partly built towered over everything in town but the church steeple. I let Travis out at the shipyard and sped off to finish my deliveries.

Back through the classier part of town with its big old houses, I delivered to Mrs. Noseworthy. The old bat took the bottles and huffed when I told her about being late because of the truck breaking down. But my crankiest delivery was Mr. Pyman on Grand Street. He wasn’t home. His maid said he was piping mad and stormed out of the house a while ago. I dropped off the milk and pressed on.

On the corner of Mercy Street lived the old Tinker, Mr. Greenwood. He was always up early and fiddling with some machine. Nothing in the

world seemed to make him happier than his little inventions that I could hardly figure out. His house was a mess of ropes and pulleys, gears and wheels for transporting things where he wanted, watering flowers. I always put the milk bottles in a metal box that automatically withdrew into the house as soon as I closed the little door.

Today, Mr. Greenwood wasn't there. But she was. His daughter. With her raven black hair as smooth as silk. She was cutting thorns off a rose bush. I stood and watched her clipping away. She moved like a poem in a book. Then I must have caught her eye because she turned with a start.

"Hey! What are you doing standing staring at me like that?"

We'd never spoken before. I'd just watched her from a far. She raised her eyebrows since I hadn't answered still.

"Sorry, miss. I was just admiring your rose bushes. I'm the milkman."

"I can see you're the milkman."

"Howie. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise. And have you got any milk for us?"

"Of course."

I put the bottles I'd been holding into Mr. Greenwood's box.

"I'm sorry for being late. The truck broke down on the coast road and —"

"Stormy," she said.

"Stormy?"

"As in, that's my name. I was born in a big storm."

"Stormy."

The whole way back to the receiving station I felt like I was driving that truck through the clouds. Over and over again I saw her turn around and heard her name...Stormy. And I forgot what kind of thrashing I was in for when I got back to the receiving station.

“What in the name of the Whale are you smiling at you incompetent louse?”

That was Billings, the station manager. He’d had it out for me from the moment I started the job. He had these big ugly lips that were too bright red and always bent into a scowl.

“Where have you been? We’ve had all sorts of complaints.”

He was standing outside the station waiting for me. I could see that all the other milk trucks were back at the station, in the parking lot. I was the last one in.

“Get your scrawny behind inside this instant. Corwin wants to see you. I’ll park the truck. By goodness these boys’ll be the death of me. If I just had 5 milkmen like McMyrtle.”

And off Mr. Billings drove. I headed inside. Billings was enraged as a matter of course, so I didn’t think much of his blustering. But Corwin. That was another matter. If there was one person in this world I didn’t want to disappoint, it was him.

As I went into the station, I heard yelling. But it wasn’t Corwin’s voice. There was Mr. Pyman, waving a newspaper up at Corwin’s face. And when I got closer, Mr. Pyman aimed his newspaper at me.

“Ah, here he is now. The man of the hour. Is it really too much to ask to have a bottle cream on my step by 8AM? What is with all these new boys? I had the same milkman for 14 years and I do not recall him ever being late, let alone not showing up at all.”

Corwin looked at me, a questioning smile on his face.

“My truck broke down on the coast road,” I said.

This didn’t go over too well. Mr. Pyman continued to berate me, Mr. Corwin and the whole organization. Corwin kept smiling at him, cool as a cucumber. He assured Mr. Pyman that he wouldn’t have to worry about late milk deliveries anymore. And finally Mr. Pyman left, muttering about the hopelessness of new boys, motorized trucks and innovation in general.

Corwin’s assistants, Frank and Beaver, were standing not far off. They both had the red badges of distinguished milkmen. How I longed for one of those badges. Corwin motioned to Frank and Beaver with his head, and they went out, following Mr. Pyman down the street. I guess they wanted to talk to him about something. Corwin wasn’t smiling any more. Instead, he was looking at me. He was calm.

“Is delivering milk too complicated for you, young man?”

“No, sir.”

“What’s your name?”

“Howie, sir. Howie Coxwell.”

“Well...Howie. You’ve made a very poor first impression. For the rest of this week, you’ll be spraying the facility for flies after your shift as penance for your late deliveries today.”

My heart sank as he walked away. I was desperate to redeem myself. So I almost shouted.

“Mr. Corwin, sir? I saw something...something suspicious on my rounds. That’s the real reason I was late. I just didn’t want to say in front of Mr. Pyman.”

Corwin stopped and turned. His gaze was intense. Withering.

“And?”

I told him all about Travis and how strangely he'd been acting. How he was looking through a spyglass, flashing a lantern out to sea, opening and closing the lantern doors in a very peculiar way. I added that part myself, but it wasn't too far from the truth. Corwin thought about this for a few moments.

"Travis? A fisherman out of town? This is very good work, Howie. Very good. You may be the only boy who was paying attention when I gave my talk. I don't think this Travis is a problem from what you've told me. Not yet, at least. But you have a good eye. You're observant. I might have another project for you. Come with me a moment, Howie."

He brought me back to where all the milk was pumped in and out of the big cans and into bottles. I saw, for the first time, the electric thermolizer. It was a huge contraption with wires and lights and gauges. I'd never seen anything like it. Mr. Corwin started looking at gauges and tapping the metal tubes.

"Do you know Mr. Greenwood? Who lives on Mercy st?" Corwin asked.

"Yes, I do. He's on my route."

"Good. Good. This Mr. Greenwood came to me a few days ago. He fancies himself a bit of an engineer. He was suspicious of our new thermolizer. Thought he might know better than the Department of Lactic Affairs about the best way to preserve the integrity of our product."

"That's just awful," I said, sounding as shocked as I could sound.

"It is, Howie. I'm glad you see it that way. I'd like you to keep a close eye on the Greenwood household. Spend some time with them. Ingratiate yourself with them. You bring me any information at all that seems...out of the ordinary. And I want this information, incriminating information, brought to me this week."

I thought about Mr. Greenwood and his little machines. I thought about Stormy cutting thorns off the rose bushes.

“The Greenwoods seem —”

“What was that, Howie?”

He glared down at me. A wave of blackness crossed his face and I felt like I was falling into some black pit.

“Yes, sir. I’ll keep a close eye on them Mr. Corwin”

“Good. Now get spraying. I don’t want to see a solitary fly in here tomorrow.”

I was on my way to get the fly juice, trying to sort everything out. Corwin was punishing me, which was a bad thing, but he wanted me to do this mission, which was perhaps a good thing.

But then my day took a turn for the decidedly nasty.

Billings, the station master came into the thermolizer room. Now he was smiling. Smiling in a constipated kind of way, mind you, but I supposed it was the best he could do.

“Just a moment there, Howie,” he growled.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been looking at your personnel file. Lodging a complaint from Mr. Pyman, you see. There are a couple of oddities I want to ask about.”

That was just about the last thing I wanted to hear, given the circumstances that brought me to the island.

“Your papers say you’re from Buckle.”

“That’s right.”

“You know the people of Buckle don’t have to sign up for the

Tow Law draft. Since it's occupied territory."

"Course I know that."

"But did you know also that we've already had a couple of boys try to come out here, apply to be milkmen, and pretend they were exempt from military service for some reason or other?"

"No. That's terrible to hear, Billings."

"What's really terrible is what happens when they're found out. Pit Testers on the front line. That's what they become. And a Pit Tester's life ain't long."

"No, I suppose it wouldn't be."

"Like I was saying. I happened to see on your file... We've got a copy of your official residence form. Buckle, S7H 3B2. But then on your job application, you put your post code as K9V 1G4. That's in Mingsbight. And boys your age from the capital should be on the front. They don't get to be milkmen on the isle of St. Gaff's."

I must have turned white as my uniform since Billings' awful smile twisted even further across his blasted head.

"No need to say anything, son. It's easy enough to sort this out. I'll reserve a spot for a phone call tomorrow. I'll ring the township of Buckle and see if they've got any record of you. And if I find you've been lying, we'll have a little chat with Mr. Corwin. Your life won't be worth a glass of moldy clotted cream. "

With that, I left for home, feeling rather down in the mouth.

2. Files and Flies

I was imagining different ways of killing Mr. Billings. Or at least hurting him real bad. Maybe I'd run him over with a milk truck. Pour some insecticide in his tea. Why Billings had it in for me, I'll never know. But figuring out that I'd written the wrong post code on my job application... That was the work of a truly depraved mind. I was just opening a bottle of fly juice and imagining how Billings would sound choking on the stuff when an annoying voice shattered my reveries.

“Stop!”

It was McMyrtle. He was another milkman about my age, 18 or 19. He was the golden boy of the operation and everyone just assumed he had a bright career ahead of him in the service. He had ‘red badge’ written all over him. I couldn't stand the peckerhead. Anyways, apparently he didn't like the way I was handling the juice. He showed me how the stuff had to be diluted and how you had to put gloves on and use a special funnel since you might burn yourself otherwise. He was telling me all about the places that were difficult to reach behind the tubes, and how to use the sprayer. I told him to get lost and that I could figure out how to spray for insects, thank you very much.

“Suit yourself,” he said, and left.

Still, I was glad I didn't burn myself on the stuff. Unfortunately, when I got to spraying. I had the nozzle pointed the wrong way and got a big mouthful. I choked a bit. Spat the stuff out. Cursed McMyrtle for

not telling me about the nozzle and got to spraying.

Now, first of all, the spray stank like vinegar and rotten eggs. And second of all, the place was clean as a whistle. So I didn't really spend too much time on it, truth be told. And also, there was a sickly feeling in my stomach from the fly juice and from worrying about what was going to happen tomorrow. So I just locked up and made my way home, feeling worse and worse. On the way home there was a sign for a doctor. Dr. Barrett, Doctor and Apothecary it said. I'd never been to a doctor before. Never had the money for one. I decided to go in thinking maybe he could help with the nausea. And with my other problem. I sat in Dr. Barrett's office. There were cabinets of powders and liquids of every colour. He was dressed all in black, sort of like a priest. I didn't know quite what to expect. I told him I thought I'd probably swallowed some of the bug spray. He said it wouldn't hurt if it was just the one time. He didn't seem to care. I think he expected me to leave, but I just sat there.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Howie?"

"Listen, doctor. Did you ever hear of someone seeing things that weren't really there?"

That seemed to get his attention.

"I have heard of that, yes. Have you been seeing things, Howie?"

"No, no. Not me. One of the other boys was talking and I thought he was pulling my leg. He said, sometimes he'd see, animals, things chasing him. And sometimes it's as if he disappears and he's somewhere else...somewhere... like a nightmare...and then he comes back."

"Ecstuceus."

"Pardon me, doctor?"

"It sounds like you've got ecstuceus. A kind of trance accompanied

by loss of reason and occasionally hallucinations.”

“Oh doctor, don’t misunderstand, it’s not me. It’s another milkman. McMyrtle. He’s quite far gone, to tell you the truth. I’m worried for him.”

“Nonsense. I know McMyrtle. He’s fit as a fiddle. Sound of body and mind. Ectsuceus can be treated, Howie.”

He went to his cabinets and looked all around. Then he brought out a dark bottle of liquid.

“Podexium. A miracle of modern medical knowledge. This should help calm the brain. But...you don’t drive a milk truck, do you Howie?”

“I certainly do, doctor.”

“I think it would be best if you didn’t drive the truck anymore. You never know when these trances can start. You wouldn’t want to be driving when something like that happens.”

“Well, but if I take the medicine I should be fine, right?”

He chuckled a bit.

“No, no Howie. We can’t have someone under the influence of Podexium driving a one ton milk truck through the town. In my opinion motorcars should be outlawed all together. Nothing but noise and danger. Did you know we’ve had 5 innocent people run down and killed by these machines since they arrived on the island? Modern convenience, some say. I say we’re tending to a total disregard for human life.”

“Sure, doctor.”

“My apologies. I shouldn’t be ranting at you. That’ll be two Ruperts for the Podexium. Take two drops in a glass of water when you’re feeling anxious. And I don’t want to see you behind the wheel

young man.”

I left there smarting. Two Ruperts? That’s a day’s wages. And I wasn’t even sure I had Ectsuceus in the first place.

I got back to my place. One of the new clapboard buildings by the shipyard. I had a bare room just about like the 20 other rooms in the building - a bed, table, shared bathroom down the hall. A picture of a whale hung on the wall. I had my dinner of cold beans and sausage. By the light of the window I read a few pages of my favorite serial: Eliza Pike, Detective Extraordinaire. Eliza was a wealthy woman, but she spent her time tracking down missing children and orphans from the poor part of town. The ones no one else cared about. Whenever she was at some society party and some rich banker would laugh and ask her why she bothered with this occupation, she would stick her finger in his face and give him a right dressing down. She’d say things like, ‘Money isn’t everything, you know!’ I loved how she stuck it to those stuffed shirts. I hear there’s a radio drama of Eliza now. But I’ve never owned a radio. In this week’s story Eliza was tracking down a fat little fellow who’d been kidnapped by a chemist who believed in fire gods and wanted to sacrifice the young pudger. I couldn’t wait to see how it ended.

Outside my room the shipyard was winding down for the day and the sun was getting lower and redder. Later, I was lying in my bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to figure out what to do about Billings, and the banging started. It happened most every night that the woman next door started hitting the wall with a large stick. If you ever saw her on the street, she always had this stick with her, muttering to herself. The stick was just a branch from a tree and it was taller than she was and it had tattered ribbons and things tied to it. She’d lost her mind long ago and her sister, the landlady, put her up in the room beside mine. I tried to put the banging out of my mind.

I had to have a plan for tomorrow. I couldn’t let Billings ruin my future life’s work. Maybe I’d interfere with the telephone somehow

so Billings couldn't make a call? Try to get hold of my file? Maybe blackmail Billings about something? But my mind kept going back to the things I'd seen under the ocean. The horrible dog's face, my mother down there...and him. And I kept thinking about Corwin's mission. About watching Mr. Greenwood and about Stormy and how good she looked. And about the doctor. Would he tell someone at the receiving station if her saw me driving, which he surely would at some point? Finally I'd had it. Before I knew what was happening, I was up on my bed, screaming at the top of my lungs and pounding on the wall.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

The banging stopped. I heard some muttering. A couple of minutes later there was a knock on my door. It was Mrs. Somertag, the landlady. She couldn't have been more than four feet tall and just about the same width. I never saw her without a broad smile on her face. She had an accent from some far-off land that I'd never heard of.

"Hi Howie, Hi. You making out okay? Job going well? Hauling lots of milk?"

"Everything's fine Mrs. Somertag. Are you here about the banging? I didn't mean..."

"Banging? Oh dear, oh dear. Perhaps the pipes. The pipes. You know the plumbing here, it was thrown together in such a slipshod way. Not like back home."

"No, it was your sister banging on the wall with her stick like she always does. And then I was banging back. Could you ask her..."

"Oh dear. My sister's birthday's coming up of course. We've got to fix the plumbing before then or we'll be mortified in front of the guests. Of course you're invited, young man. Don't worry about not being invited. I'm going to bake a cake."

“All right Mrs., if you don’t mind I’d like to get some sleep. Got to get up very early, you know.”

“Right you are, Freddie.”

After she left, I started drifting off. And it started again. Bang...bang...bang...I put the pillow over my head, but it was no use. She might as well have been banging that stick on the inside of my skull. And laughing at me to boot.

Soon after, I was out on the street in the moonlight . There was no one around. I didn’t know where I was going. I was just walking. It was quiet here at night. I passed by the cathedral. The only telephone in town was in the cathedral’s bell tower. Maybe I could get in there and break the thing. But the great oak doors were locked. And plus I thought I heard voices in the church, too.

I continued downtown. It was a clear night. The red and white moons were casting weird shadows over everything since they were in different parts of the sky tonight. I saw old Mr. Florsham, the retired professor shuffling around. The old guy couldn’t sleep and was often seen rambling through the streets at night. I just walked on past him. When I got to the receiving station, and passed by the parked trucks, I thought I heard sounds of digging coming from Corwin’s office. The station, by the way, is a big square building with an adjoining lot for trucks and deliveries. It’s all painted over white, except for Billy on the wall. That’s what I called him anyways. Billy was a big mural of the most perfect smiling milkman you ever saw, holding up a bottle. “Cold Delicious Milk,” he said. I never failed to greet old Billy on the wall with a cheerful “good morning” before my shift. I’m sure he was put up there to set us milkmen in the right frame of mind before going out into the world. But tonight, old Billy on the wall seemed to be glaring. Asking me what the blazes I was doing out here. So I walked on past without a word.

In addition to the main building, Corwin had an office built on the side of the station. On the side where the trucks parked. He was a busy man so he needed his own space to work uninterrupted. No one was allowed in there. The only really striking thing was that his office had a big set of double doors instead of just the one door. And that's where this digging noise was coming from. But probably my mind was playing tricks on me. An echo of the old woman's banging on the walls.

There was no one around to see, so I unlocked the door and let myself in. Being in there with no one around was quite liberating. It was as if you'd snuck into your schoolhouse at night as a child and had the place to yourself. So, just because I could, I let out a loud, 'YOP!'

What was that? Sounded like a tool dropping. Maybe I wasn't so alone? I listened and didn't hear anything more. Perhaps hurrying up and getting out of there would be best. The back room where Billings worked and where all the files were was locked. I didn't have the key to that door. Picking the lock might work. If only I had some clue about how to pick a lock. It was dark and I groped around for something I could use. And there was that digging noise again.

To hell with it. I smashed the door with all my weight and fell into the room. The moonlight was shining in the window and I went through the personnel files as fast as I could. Alphabetized. But my file wasn't there. Billings must have taken it home with him. So he didn't even trust me that far? The miserable, low-minded bastard. There was no way to fix the door. And Billings might figure it was me rooting around in there in the night. So I grabbed an armful of the files to make it look like an act of industrial espionage and ran out of there fast as I could, stuffing the files under my shirt.

Once outside, I locked the front door. And to make it look like a proper burglary, I picked up a rock, smashed the front window and ran like hell. But then, I froze. Standing there, just outside Corwin's

office, was Beaver, Corwin's bodyguard. He was holding a shovel and just staring at me with no expression at all. I turned away and ran all the way home clutching the files under my shirt. I didn't know what to do with the papers so I shoved them under my mattress and lay there awake, sweating and trembling until it was time to get to work. I don't know if I slept a wink that night.

When I reported to the station that morning before dawn, the police were already there. Inspector Piercey was examining the broken window shards with a magnifying glass and one of his men was speaking to Billings. I watched Piercey for a moment. He was mumbling to himself about particles and fibres, testing the wind with his finger. And Billings snapped at me.

"This is no business of yours, Howie. Get to your route. We'll not have two days in a row of late deliveries."

As I got the truck started and hopped in, I noticed, there was Beaver again, standing on the edge of the parking lot. Just staring right at me and not saying a word. Sweat broke out on my forehead. But off I drove.

The morning went along without incident. Travis wasn't acting so suspicious this morning. Mrs. Noseworthy huffed at me despite my timely arrival. I dreaded dropping milk off for Mr. Pyman after the spat yesterday. But his wife. Mrs. Pyman, answered and took the milk. She looked upset. Well, I'd be upset if I were married to old Mr. Pyman, too.

The last stop, of course, was the Greenwood household. It occurred to me as I pulled up to the house that if I did a good job with this Greenwood assignment, Corwin might overlook any minor discrepancies in my files. And the more I thought about it, the more I saw that this was the key to all my troubles. If I succeeded, I could not only thumb my nose at Billings, I'd probably even get a red

badge. And Stormy would have to take notice of a red badge. She'd have to give me a chance then. And all I had to do was find some kind of incriminating evidence against Mr Greenwood and make sure Stormy never found out it was me who found it. I knocked on the door determined to charm my way into their lives, and to unearth whatever it was Corwin knew was in there. But no one came to the door. I knocked again. The neighbour popped her head out.

"There's a note, dearie," she said.

And indeed, there was a note on the foot of the door. It read, 'Death in the family. Out of town until Thursday earliest. No milk. The Greenwoods.' I cursed my bad luck and started back to the station. On my way, though, I saw something highly unusual. Passing back by Mr. Pyman's house, there were two police cars parked outside, and two officers were dragging old Mr. Pyman out of his house. He had bruises on his face and his hands were all bandaged up, maybe from resisting the police. He was kicking and screaming, and his wife just stood there covering her mouth with both hands. And then Mr. Pyman spotted me and turned red as a chokecherry. He pointed at me and in a weird high-pitched scream, shouted,

"It's him. This is all his doing! I had nothing to do with it!"

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I stopped my truck beside a police car and asked the officer inside what was going on.

"It seems the old man broke into the milk receiving station last night and made off with a number of sensitive files. Someone dropped us an anonymous note and we found the papers right where the note said they'd be. Under his mattress. Looks like he was planning to sell the documents to the enemy. Who'd of thought. The first confirmed case of true subversion on the island."

The officers stuffed a gag into Mr. Pyman's mouth and shoved him in the back of the car. This was all really perplexing, since I knew it

was actually me who'd broken into the milk station last night and I didn't see Pyman anywhere. Maybe he'd snuck in after I left? What on earth was going on? I almost drove home to check the papers under my bed. But if I did that, I'd be late getting back to the station and was in enough hot water already. I pulled the truck onto the lot and there was Billings waiting, with his ugly red lips grinning at me.

"Finished your route, Howie? No troubles this morning?"

"No trouble, Mr. Billings."

"Don't think I've forgotten about our appointment. Good thing the 'burglar' didn't get this."

And he patted a satchel that was slung over his shoulder.

"Corwin's with the police at the cathedral. They've had to spend a lot of time on the phone trying to arrange transportation for Mr. Pyman. But once they're done, it'll be my turn."

I just stood there looking at him.

"Nothing to say? Not to worry, Howie. Now get in the back and start spraying."

I went back and got the juice. But I had the shakes in my hands. I could feel a pressure rising in my head. I remembered what the doctor had told me: 'If you start getting anxious, just have a drink of this here stuff and you'll be fine.' The bottle of Podexium was in my bag. I uncorked it and took a few gulps. I got to spraying, and by the whale, one day of inattention surely had made a difference. There were flies buzzing everywhere. Even if I somehow got off from the post code fiasco, there was no way Corwin would let me off the hook for all these flies. The man hated vermin.

I sprayed every little nook and cranny, every pipe. I watched the little buggers die, but still they kept coming. The air was getting thick with the things. Rubbing against my skin like a carpet. The buzzing in

my ears. They were landing on me, expelling their acid and trying to digest me. I knew they were. The sprayer empty, I surrendered. And the world went black, buzzing, close, hot, and I felt I'd been swallowed. And I was crawling in the blackness, through a tunnel. They were talking, laughing, milling about with glasses of champagne. I was in a Mingsbight tube station with no trains. Just a lot of fancy people in gowns and dinner jackets. They were on the platform and some were mingling on the tracks. I tried to get through to the exit, up to the street, but couldn't get past the press of bodies. The women's lips covered in garish red lipstick. Drinking, talking, laughing. I pushed and pushed. And then, one by one, they disappeared. Each one shot up into the air like an angel flies up to heaven.

Until I was alone. With the dog. The Doberman. The hound from hell with its red eyes and thirsty fangs. It ran me down. It bit my leg hard, snarling, it wouldn't let go. I shook it off and ran like the dickens across the station. I got to the wall. I was about to jump down into the tunnel and run. But something welled up inside me. What was this dog? Why should I run?

As it leaped, maw agape and aimed directly at my throat, I grabbed the thing in midair and slammed its vile head into the wall. It fell, and I fell, still clutching its neck. I smashed its head against the floor tiles again and again, until its skull went soft in my hands and the brains oozed out its ears. And just like that, it was rotten and festering. And its dead eye looked laughingly at me.

A train passed through the station without stopping. And I was soaked in sweat in my bed. There was the picture of the whale hanging on my wall. My detective magazine. And I could've cried to be back in my own place with my own things and the shipyard out the window. I checked under the bed. The papers, thank goodness, were there. It was early evening now. But something was hurting. My leg. And there was a knocking at the door. I could

hardly get up from the pain in my leg. It was Mrs Somertag.

“My goodness, Freddie, your leg! You got it caught in some machine?”

I looked down and saw that she was right. There was a real bite out of my leg and it was bleeding all over the place.

My head was pounding like I'd had a couple of pints of midlands whiskey. I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

“Well Freddie, you'd better get down to the milk station. Something terrible's happened.”

I ripped up an old shirt and tied it around my leg as best I could and hobbled down to the milk station. It was just about sunset. When I got there, the police had already arrived. Corwin was standing and talking to Beaver and Frank. He gave me a sideways glance as I passed by. The other milkmen were there. McMyrtle was even crying. I pushed through to see what all the fuss was about. And there, lying on the ground, was old Mr. Billings. Half his throat torn away. Flies crawling all around his revolting red lips. A few maggots crawling around his nose. And if you haven't seen those things, they can really move. His dead eye looked at me. But the bastard couldn't say a goddamned thing anymore. And there, on the ground, was my personnel file that no one in their right mind would care to examine as closely as that dead man on the street there.

McMyrtle was standing beside me.

“Who could have done such a horrible thing. And to such a lovely man,” the peckerhead exclaimed.

“A terrible shame.” I said.

Mr. Piercey came up to us.

“Boys, I'm afraid something terrible has happened to Mr.

Billings.”

As if we couldn't see his cadaver mouldering away right in front of us.

“If you saw anything strange this afternoon, you should tell me right away.”

“I sprayed for flies and went straight home. Nothing out of the ordinary,” I said.

“The poor man,” McMyrtle whimpered.

“Quite right. I'm going to check around for fibres. There is something very strange going on at this station and I don't like it. You boys'll have to come in for an interview in a day or two. So sort out your everything you remember about today.”

I limped back home in the red light of dusk. I racked my brain trying to remember, knowing that what happened to Billings was somehow my fault. Knowing I'd done something terrible, but not quite what. I stopped in an alley and puked. I wiped off my mouth with my sleeve. The sky turned a brilliant crimson as the sun dipped over the horizon, and some other feeling bubbled up and mixed in with the black forgotten memories.

My heart filled with gratitude to the moon and stars for my wondrous luck. I was off the hook!

3. Numbers

I woke from a heavy, dreamless sleep. When I opened my eyes, it took me a minute to remember where I was or even who I was. A cool breeze blew in from the window. It was still dark. I got this sudden urge to get outside and breathe in the sea air and really soak up the first few minutes of freedom I had before setting off to work.

And then I remembered...I remembered Billings lying there dead.

I got up and looked out the window. They'd slapped my building together right beside the shipyard and the big unfinished hull was there looming in the dark. In the darkness it looked like someone had taken a bite out of the horizon. And then a thought popped into my head: No one on this island knows about my past. They won't suspect me. A few mouthfuls of cold sausage later, I decided to go for that walk after all.

And then I was out there, alone, in the cool morning air. And no one in the world knew I was there. I felt free but I was still haunted by this feeling that I'd done something terrible and couldn't remember what it was. I tried to push it down as far as I could. I told myself, 'Here you are, in a new place, with a bright future. A good job with good prospects. Maybe this island really could be home.' At the station, I offered a cheerful good morning to old Billy on the Wall. He seemed to be in a fine mood. Although the twinkle in his eye told me he knew what had really happened yesterday. If only he could tell me what it was.

I started my rounds. First out to see old Travis. When I got to the fisherman's cottage, Travis was there again with his spyglass. And his daughter Naomi was there too. Travis was so wrapped up with looking out to sea he didn't even hear me pull up. He gave the glass to Naomi. I hopped out of the truck and she yipped,

"I saw it! I saw it, dad!"

By then the milk bottles I'd gotten out clinked and they both looked over to me.

"And what did you see there, Naomi?" I asked.

But Travis responded instead,

"We think there's a whale out there, Howie."

It sounded believable enough, so I didn't put it in my notebook and I delivered their two bottles as usual.

"Be seeing you." Travis said as I drove off.

Back in town, I pulled up to the Pyman household. They hadn't cancelled their order despite Mr. Pyman being hauled off by the police yesterday. I knocked on the door holding two bottles. Mrs. Pyman opened a window and hissed at me.

"Get out of here."

I was a little put out to tell the truth. It wasn't my fault her husband got arrested. Even if the files he supposedly took were under my mattress. And like I said, they hadn't cancelled their order and I could have gotten into trouble for not making a delivery. The Greenwoods wouldn't be back until tomorrow, earliest. I also had this nagging worry that Billings had in fact got off a phone call about my post code before he kicked the bucket. I decided to have a chat with Father Wheelan to see if I could find out. Father Wheelan was a rather portly fellow and quite a messy eater. He always seemed to have greasy spots on his frock.

As I mentioned, the only telephone in town was in the bell tower of the church. It was, of course, exclusively for official military, police or church business. Unless Father Wheelan made an exception.

“So, Father Wheelan,” I asked after handing him his bottles, “there was quite a kerfuffle in town yesterday, what with Mr. Pyman being arrested and poor, poor Billings turning up dead.”

“It was a lot of excitement for one day.”

“Before he...slipped away...Billings told me he had to make an urgent call to the Department of Lactic Affairs, I believe. Do you happen to know if he managed to make the call?”

“Billings? No. He wasn’t in. The police were up there most of the day arranging transportation for Mr. Pyman.”

“Mr. Pyman? You mean to jail?”

Wheelan chuckled a bit.

“Not just any jail,” he said. “For treasonous activities they take you to the Rooms. An island further out even than St. Gaff’s. No one’s ever come back from the Rooms. I’ve heard there’s a pit there. And you know what that means.”

I did indeed know what that meant. But he went on,

“Listen, lad. You pass by Granard’s Chippery just before coming here, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, father, it is.”

“How about if you pick me up a fish sandwich from now on before delivering the milk. I’ll toss in an extra... quarter-Rupert a week for you.”

It was a good deal and I agreed. After my deliveries, I met with all the other milkmen in the big room. Corwin wanted to give a talk about everything that had happened the past couple of days.

“My fellow milkmen,” he began, “I had hoped this speech would never be necessary. That the town of St. Gaff’s would be spared the pestilence that has infected so much of the mainland. But I must tell you now, that the black wind of subversion has made its way to our fair shores. No longer can we sit back idly, believing the war a distant problem with which others must contend. No. It is here. It is here in this town and it is here in this very station. One of our own citizens has been turned. By whom, we do not yet know. By all accounts, Mr. Pyman was one of the gentlest and most generous souls on this island. And yet, he succumbed to some temptation, the nature of which the best of us can scarcely imagine. He made so bold as to break into our file room and make off with many of our most sensitive documents. To think what the enemy could have done with that information. It was only the astute work of our cunning police force that prevented certain catastrophe. Let that be a lesson especially to you younger boys. Do not trust too much in the appearance of things.

“But our troubles did not end with the insidious Pyman.

“Another tragedy took place on this island yesterday. Our very own Mr. Billings gave his life for the cause. A life he had devoted to the service. His management of this station was tight as a drum and orderly as a grandfather clock. He knew the value of our work and died that we may go on with our mission of providing quality milk products in a punctual fashion. It’s clear that whoever corrupted Mr. Pyman, disappointed by his arrest, returned for still more information. Billings evidently tried to fight the villain off. Our man’s courage was evident from the wounds he sustained defending our station’s integrity. Henceforth, this establishment will be known as the Billings Memorial Milk Receiving Station.

“Remember. There remains at least one other agent somewhere in our midst. An agent who thinks nothing of brutally murdering one of our own in the quest to serve the enemy. Be vigilant. As milkmen, you

boys are exempt from conscription to the front lines. But all those boys in the trenches have to do is aim their rifles and pull the trigger. You boys labour under a double duty. You must be the eyes and ears that no one else can be, watching for subversion in any form it may take. But your chief duty is to maintain the orderly delivery of our product in any and all circumstances. And this I vow to you. No matter what damage the enemy may do, the milk will be on time. We will deliver in the absence of gasoline, we will deliver in the face of invasion, we will deliver regardless of the efforts of spies or traitors. We will not be stopped. And, in the progress of time, years and decades hence, when a boy asks his father what he did during the war, I promise you, those boys, fighting on the front lines, then grown old, will look back and rue the day that they were called to the trenches rather than serving with the milkmen of St. Gaff's."

A huge cheer went up and all the milkmen jumped to their feet. I cheered too, being swept up in the moment. I thought Corwin was just the best. Later, after everyone else had cleared out, Corwin called to me.

"Howie?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Any news on the Greenwood front?"

"I'm sorry to say, Mr. Corwin, that the family is out of town until tomorrow. A death in the family it seems."

He chewed on this for a moment.

"Keep me updated."

"Of course, sir. Mr. Corwin? Listen. About the Greenwoods. Is there any way we could...well...do you think that once I find what I'm supposed to find, is there any way we could not let them know it was me who found it?"

A broad fatherly grin crossed his face.

“And why is that, Howie?”

“Well, maybe if people were to find out, they wouldn’t want to talk to me as much and then I wouldn’t be as useful to the service.”

Corwin’s grin got even bigger.

“Why Howie, it’s understood that this is to be only between us milkmen. You strike me as the type who can keep a secret.”

He didn’t know how right he was. Or maybe he did.

“Yes sir, mum’s the word.”

“Good boy, Howie.”

Just then McMyrtle walked up and said, right in front of Corwin, mind you,

“Howie. You forgot to drop off your log for today.”

“I was just about to get to it, peckerhead.”

Except I didn’t actually call him peckerhead to his face. I just thought it.

Actually, Corwin chimed in before I had a chance to answer,

“We must be diligent with the logs, Howie. Incidentally, in light of Billings’...absence...I have to rearrange some of your duties. Howie, one of Billings’ responsibilities was to drive to the centre of the island on Thursday afternoons and do a bit of radio work for us. It’s not hard work, but it is crucial. Do you think you can handle that, Howie?”

“I sure can, Mr. Corwin!”

I could see McMyrtle turning a sickly shade of green.

“But...” he started.

“And you, McMyrtle, will take over spraying for flies.”

McMyrtle opened his mouth to object, but you don't talk back to Corwin.

"Howie's proven himself to be totally inept at that task. There's a lot of buzzing back there and I want it gone today. I've seen how you spray, McMyrtle, and we need our best man on that job."

The peckerhead smiled and I think maybe he even believed what Corwin was telling him. Meanwhile, I was glowing inside like one of those lamps that glows really bright. I could see it, clear as day, me wearing a red badge and telling McMyrtle that there was more spraying to do. It was finally all coming together for me.

I had a few hours before I was to sign out a truck and go do this radio thing. I just sort of wandered downtown, and then to the harbour. I was pretty surprised to see Mr. Pyman tied to a post by the ferry dock. His hands were tied with thick ropes and he still had a gag in his mouth. When I walked past he sort of yelled as best he could, which scared me. Some old sailor who was hanging around saw this all and started chuckling to himself. I went up and asked,

"And what's up with him, then?"

"Oh, you wouldna' want to be in his shoes, mate. If yer caught with the subversion they're liable to just leave ya to rot like that until a transport ship comes to take ya to the Rooms."

"You mean they'll just leave him there day and night?"

"Quite possibly many days and nights."

I shuddered to think. But I guess traitors have it coming to them.

The road to the radio transmitting station wound westward through the middle of the island. It was on the highest peak, a Lomond, as they called any mountain of a certain height on St.

Gaff's. The interior was mostly devoid of human habitation. There were some farms on green rolling hills, light brown cows munching on grass. The source of all our milk and cream. Altogether it was a pleasant drive. At the top of Mount Glenmoy was a corrugated tin shack with a big metal pole thing sticking up high into the sky. I looked out over the island. I'd never been to so high a place before and had never been so alone. I wished I could just stand there and watch the clouds roll by all day. I thought my mother would love this prospect. And then I remembered what had happened between us, and ducked into the shed.

Inside I was stunned to see a mass of machines of all shapes and sizes. Knobs, dials, lights, cables and wires. The phonograph machine Corwin had mentioned. I'd never seen one up close. I had to do the radio speech at five PM sharp, by the clock on the wall. I had a few minutes, so I poked around. In a closet, I found a dusty old machine that I thought was a radio. About a foot across, with three dials. It clearly hadn't been used for a long time and I figured no one would miss it. So I packed it the truck thinking that if I got it working, I could listen to Eliza on the radio.

Just before 5, I got out the instruction book and the paper Corwin had given me. I turned the crank on the big radio until the lights came on. Found the microphone. When the clock struck five, I pushed a button on the phonograph and heard the silliest little tune you ever heard. When it was over, I read into the microphone:

"Braka Braka Braka.

3 9 7 1 5, 3 9 7 1 5, 3 9 7 1 5, 3 9 7 1 5, 3 9 7 1 5

6 6 4 7 5, 6 6 4 7 5, 1 9 2 7 4, 1 9 2 7 4, 9 2 0 2 8, 9 2 0 2 8, 7 8 4 9 4 7 8 4 9 4.

Braka Braka Braka."

I hadn't a clue what it was all about. I set the record back to the

beginning and played it again. And just like that, I was done. Suddenly, outside the shack, it was silent, and I was alone again on the top of mount Glenmoy. The sun was setting and the clouds and valley below all turned a brilliant crimson. It was like the world slowed down and a warm breeze picked up. And I thought one day I'd bring Stormy up here and we'd watch the sunset together. All the drive back home I could see her smile and her black hair. I would point things out to her and show that I was a man who knew my business. The Lomonds, the cows. I'd learn what kind of cows they were. And maybe we'd have a cow of our own and a quiet place in the interior. It was one of the nicest dream's I'd ever had.

When I pulled into the station, my daydream stopped. The air was weird and dark and again I heard a digging sound inside Corwin's office. Billy on the wall followed me with his eyes as I drove by, not saying a word. I bet he knew what they were digging for. But he wouldn't breathe a word about it to me.

I parked in the far away corner of the lot. I'm the only who parks so far away. I like the feel of a longer walk across the parking lot, basking in that feeling of being a true bone fide milkman. But this time, when I stepped out of the truck, it was like stepping on sponge. The ground was soft. It must be hollow under there, I thought. Perhaps it had something to do with all that digging? But digging underground, as everyone knows, is a highly restricted activity. And if Corwin was having some digging done, he must have had his reasons and it was none of my affair.

I kind of poked the soft patch of asphalt with my toe, and could tell that if I pushed too hard my foot would go right through. So I gave it a kick with my heel, and sure enough, part of the lot caved in - maybe a foot and a half in width. No one was around, so I tried to peer down into the hole, but as I knelt down — Ack — something flew past me, brushing my face. There were a lot of them. Some sort

of dust? And a horrible smell. I looked up...my dear lord. It was like something from one of my episodes...Seven or eight of them. A flock a dead birds. Crows. Half skeleton...rotten. I sneezed from whatever dust they gave off. They circled over me a couple of times and flew off across the town.

Back on my feet again, I looked around and I don't think anyone else saw. But I had to cover up that hole. Digging is one of the worst crimes you can commit if you don't have a permit. I grabbed a milk crate from the back of the truck and put it over the hole. That would have to do for now. I was pretty shaken. But then I thought to myself, no harm no foul. No one saw and the birds flew off anyways. If they were even real, which probably they weren't It was probably my imagination acting up again. I composed myself as best I could and went in to drop off the paper with all the numbers on it.

Beaver, huge as ever, was at the front desk where Billings used to sit. He stared at me with those dead eyes that knew too much. He gave me the willies. I dropped off the sheet and headed home to my dinner and a few pages of Eliza Pike to purge the weird feeling Beaver had set on me. I had to carry the radio all the way home, which was a pain. I'd have to figure out how it worked some other day. As I was hauling the radio up the stairs, Mrs Somertag stopped me.

"Oh Howie. You've got one of those automatic bread boxes?"

"Ummm Yes, sure Mrs. Somertag."

I just kept going without asking what on earth an automatic bread box could be.

That night, when the banging next door started, I managed to drift off to sleep anyways. The banging mixed in with my dreams...banging against an old radio that was firing loaves of bread across the ocean. 6 6 4 7 5...

The next day, Stormy and her father, Mr. Greenwood, were

back. It was time to pull together everything I'd learned for my second interrogation. When I arrived at their place, Stormy was outside again doing some kind of gardening, dressed all in black. She heard me getting bottles from the truck.

"Hi there, Howie."

"Hello, Stormy. How are you? I mean. I'm sorry to hear about whoever it was that died in your family."

"My aunt. She lived in Skaw on the north end of the island."

"I never been up that far."

"No one has. There's just a village of 20 people or so and a lighthouse. A big bunch of fog just kind of hangs there all the time so you can hardly ever even look at the sea."

"Sounds very nice, very nice. Maybe I'll be going up there one of these days. On official business, you know."

"Official business? Delivering milk?"

"Some folks think the service is just about that. But for up and comers like me, there's a lot of travelling. A lot of important business we can't even talk about."

Her eyes opened wide and she looked right at me. I couldn't believe it was happening. We were really talking.

"Like what sort of business?" She asked.

"As I said, it's all very confidential. Like yesterday, I drove up to the top of Mount Glenmoy. You probably haven't ever been up there. But there's some radiophonic machinery up there that only us milkmen can operate. It's all part of the war effort, actually."

"I always heard that you boys joined the milkmen to get out of fighting in the war."

This really got my goat. But it was a chance to show how cool and collected I could be.

“Maybe the under-educated think that. But those in the know understand that we’re the backbone of our whole civilization. Your father maybe takes the cream in his morning coffee for granted. But without that cream, this whole place would go up in smoke and all of our culture too.”

She was so impressed that she didn’t seem to know what to say. So I went on.

“I’m in line for a red badge. Once I have a couple more of our secret missions under my belt, I’ll be quite an important fellow down at the station.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right. Listen Stormy. Speaking of official business. Do you think you might call on your dad for me? I have some fairly official questions to ask him, actually.”

“Oh. Okay, then.”

Mr. Greenwood came out. A jovial older man with a few curls remaining on his head and thick bifocals on his red nose. I’d been fiddling a bit with the old radio I’d found and couldn’t get the blasted thing working. That seemed like a good ice-breaker.

“You’re good with machines, Mr. Greenwood. I found an old radio but I can’t get it to work. Any idea what the problem could be?”

“A radio?” Mr. Greenwood asked, “I’d really have to see it. They all work a bit differently.”

“Maybe I could bring it by and you could have a look some time?”

“Sure, Howie, sure.”

He seemed pretty comfortable talking with me, so I commenced my assault. Stormy was listening intently to all of this.

“Mr. Greenwood, you make all these machines around your house. Did you ever get a chance to look at the electric thermolizer down at the station?”

“In fact, I did. I had a good look when they took it off the ferry,” he said.

“It’s quite a wondrous machine. It’s revolutionized the quality of the milk. Getting rid of all the bad bacteria and all...wouldn’t you say?”

“Sure Howie, sure.”

He waited a moment as if he wanted to say more but wasn’t sure if he should. And then I guess he just couldn’t hold it in.

“But that machine, Howie. It’s not for milk. They say it’s supposed to heat the milk up to kill any pathogens. But that’s not what it does. I bet you it isn’t even connected to the milk supply. It’s a condenser of some sort.”

“Dad. Don’t,” Stormy said.

“Oh, tut tut,” Mr. Greenwood replied, “Howie’s interested in machines. Maybe he’d like to know what the machine’s really for.”

“And what is it really for, Mr. Greenwood?”

“I don’t know, Howie, but if I could get in there one day...And all that business with Mr. Pyman. It just doesn’t seem right. Something very odd is happening at that milk station.”

“Dad. Why do you care what goes on in the milk station?”

“I’m just curious is all,” he said.

“Mr. Pyman’s been arrested, fair and square. And I’m afraid the

thermolizer's in the back room. Totally off limits to the eyes of civilians."

Stormy was kind enough to walk me back to my truck.

"Sorry about dad. Curious as a cat, he is."

"Oh it's no trouble. He's got a real talent with mechanics. I don't blame him at all for being curious. But really, our equipment is highly specialized and not fit to be understood by lay persons."

"That makes sense," she said thoughtfully.

We stopped by the truck. My breathing got shallow and I felt my face turning red. I knew this was my chance. And I meant to take it. But by God, I was nervous.

"Listen. Stormy. Would you ever want to have a soda? At the drug store? With me?"

"Sure I would!"

I couldn't believe my ears and I knew I'd remember that moment the rest of my life. We agreed to meet at eight. I tried to finish the week's Eliza serial, but couldn't stop staring at the clock. I couldn't eat dinner. And long before I had to, I spiffed myself up. Put on my one decent set of civies. Slicked my hair back with a spoonful of lard. I was about to leave, when there was a loud banging on my door. It was Beaver.

"Boss wants to see you. Right now."

"But I have..."

"Right now, I says. In uniform."

There was nothing for it but to go with Beaver.

4. The Man from D.O.L.A.

So there I was, all dressed up, nervous and excited to see Stormy, and here was Beaver insisting I put on my uniform and go see Corwin right away. I couldn't say no. I got back into my uniform while Beaver sat his enormous arse down on my bed.

"What's this about? I didn't do anything wrong," I said.

And he just stared at me with this quizzical look. And then I realized with horror that all those files I'd stolen were still under the mattress he was sitting on. A couple were even sticking out. Could he know? So I tried to distract him.

"Beaver, you know, I wouldn't mind at all going any other time, but just between us fellows, I'm seeing a girl tonight. And you don't want to keep a lady waiting, now do you?"

He cocked his head to the side but didn't say a thing. Just kept staring at me. He surely was the weirdest milkman I ever met. And I guessed Stormy would be left sitting alone at the store wondering what kind of a jerk I was. So off we went to the receiving station. We walked along in silence. It felt like rain was coming. And it was quiet. Quiet like the town knew to stay out of the way of whatever was happening down at the receiving station tonight.

Course, I was used to nights in Mingsbight, where groups of kids as young as nine roamed the streets at all hours whooping and

hollering. I snuck out a few times with those boys and girls, The Pirates of Jeddore, we were called, and we raised more hell than a band of drunken soldiers. But back then, unlike most of those kids, I had parents and they quickly put a stop to my nocturnal sorties. But those are some fond memories. Walking in silence with this big oaf of a milkman, without so much as a word about what we were up to, and missing my date with Stormy, I finally felt all the responsibilities of being an adult come crashing down on me. We got to the station and Beaver pointed to a spot beside Corwin's office.

"Stand there. Don't talk," he said.

Then one of the old-time milkmen comes out of Corwin's office. His name was Walker. A grey-haired old coot, close to retirement I would guess. He fancied himself the keeper of milkman's lore here on St. Gaff's. Walker was always full of stories about this old boss who was stripped of his command after getting drunk as a loon and shouting obscenities and company secrets from the roof of the station, or the young tyro who fell down a hole on the north end of town and was never heard from again. Walker always acted like he had a secret he couldn't tell, but I never much cared for his stories and didn't listen too carefully in any case. Anyways, this Walker fellow came out of Corwin's office and said to Beaver,

"He'll be about three hours, so just sit tight."

And I blurted out,

"If we're here three hours doing nothing, can't I go —"

They looked at me, as shocked as if Billy on the Wall had just spoken. But Billy just seemed to wink at me. So I shut my trap and settled in for the long haul. I could just see Stormy now...looking at the clock, wondering where I was. She'd probably think something terrible had happened. She'd hardly be able to hold back her tears as she paid for her

soda with her own money. Outside the pharmacy, she'd break down...inconsolable. She'd weep all the way home. People would stop to ask her what was wrong, but she wouldn't even be able to answer.

Beaver sat on a bench on the sidewalk and smoked a pipe. I paced about. Vibrating all over from wanting to know what happened with Stormy and wishing I could go to her. Finally Beaver burst out,

“Stop that blasted pacing, you bloody booby.”

So I stood and conversed with Billy on the wall, in my head, mind you. Silently. I doubt very much that Beaver would stand for me talking out loud to a mural.

“And how are we tonight there, Billy?”

He didn't say much in return. His smile was sort of a cruel mocking one tonight. I thought he'd be a better friend to me after my being so cordial with him every morning. But finding no help from Billy, I just sat myself down on the curb and tried not to let my woes get the better of me. I sometimes looked over at Beaver sitting there, betting he'd never had a real woe in his whole life.

Anyways, around midnight, up drives a big glossy black car. The kind you might see outside a bank in downtown Mingsbight. And out stepped a very grave looking man in a dark suit. His face gray and gaunt in the moonlight. Just as he got out, Beaver knocked on the door to Corwin's office. And out comes Corwin. They shook hands and then just stood there like they were waiting for something. Not a word spoken between them. And that's when I noticed a sign on the car door. A white circle with a cow head in the middle. And I read the words: Department of Lactic Affairs. But by accident I read the words out loud. I sometimes do that. Everyone was glaring at me.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Shut. Up,” Beaver hissed.

So I just stood there trying to look mysterious like the others. So the man is from the Department of Lactic Affairs, I thought to myself. I should try to make a good impression. And there we waited. Maybe half an hour or so. The man from the department of lactic affairs kept looking at his big gold wristwatch. Then something happened that I wasn't expecting at all would happen. Down the road came Frank. And he was leading a big white bull. Right down the main street of St Gaff's at half past midnight. And he was being more calm than you'd think he'd be. No one was around since usually people went to bed pretty early around here. When Frank had the bull up close to the station, under a gaslight near the entrance of the station, the man from the department went up and looked it over. He took out a little brush and a magnifying glass. Still, no one said a word. Until the department man said,

“Not a single black hair.”

Corwin gave a very slight smile and Beaver opened the big double doors to Corwin's office. There were a bunch of candles lit inside and all the rest of them started leading the bull right into Corwin's office, where he worked and slept and everything. I started to follow, but Beaver hissed at me again,

“You wait here. Don't let no one in and keep a note of anyone who passes.”

So in they all went, closing the door behind them, and there I waited with no clue how long I'd be there. And I waited and waited. Old mister Florsham walked by on one of his late night walks. Poor old fellow couldn't sleep as usual.

“Hello there, Howie.”

“Hello, Mr. Florsham. Can't sleep?”

“I can't. I was reading from Saint Hobbes and the wheels got to turning and I just had to get out and walk.”

“I sure know that feeling,” I said.

He gave me a sardonic kind of a smile and said nothing. But I was pretty bored, so I decided to keep the conversation going.

“Saint Hobbes...Is that what you used to teach at the university?”

“Among other things, yes, Howie,” he said, “and why are you out here at this hour?”

It was time for thinking fast. So I said, “oh we’re just doing some maintenance work on the pipes and such. Got to be done at night so’s not to interfere with deliveries.” “And they left you to stand guard?”

“Yes, that’s it, Mr. Florsham.”

“You wouldn’t want anyone sneaking in and interfering with the pipes, now would you?”

“That’s right. You’ve got it right on the nose there, sir”

“They’ve got their best man on it, yeah? Nothing’s gonna get by old Howie.”

“I hope not, Mr. Florsham.”

“And what’s this big black car here? Department of Lactic Affairs. They brought in someone from head office for the repairs, did they?”

I chewed on this a moment before answering.

“I don’t know anything about this car. It was here when I arrived. You’d better move on, though, mister. I’m supposed to make a note of anyone passing by and we don’t want any trouble.”

He chuckled a bit at this.

“Okay Howie, I’ll leave you to it.” And with that he wandered off, lost in whatever profound thoughts he popping into his head. Clearly, I was getting the hand of obfuscating and dodging.

Not much happened after that. I sort of dozed on my feet until I heard the doors to Corwin's office open. Frank and Beaver walked out with the bull. It was all sweaty now. And inside, I just caught a glance of Corwin and the man from the department taking off big flowing red robes. But Frank quickly closed the door after the bull was out. He led it back up the street the same way he'd arrived. Beaver came up to me.

"Don't tell no one about this. And don't be late tomorrow."

Then he sticks his big finger into my chest and glared at me with his red pig eyes.

"And put those files back where they belong tomorrow."

I felt like I just about fell through the floor. Even though I was out on the street. I reckoned it must have been three or three thirty in the morning. Even old Billy on the wall could hardly keep his eyes open. I walked back home and it started misting...not quite raining. I was cold and tired and had a terrible feeling in my guts about the files. So they knew all along about me taking off with the documents but never said a thing? And what were they doing with that bull and those robes? They clearly didn't mind too much that I was seeing these things. Did that mean they trusted me? Or that I was so far beneath their notice that they didn't care at all what I saw or what I did? Hard questions.

As I took the road for home, I started sniffing...then I sneezed. When I looked up, I saw them. Three of those dead crows that escaped from the hole the other day. I stared at them. And they stared at me. I froze as one swooped down. I shielded myself with my arms but the thing pecked at my head. It pulled at a bit of my hair before flying off. I yelled and waved frantically trying to get it off. It retreated, but when the other two swooped towards me I ran the other way with every bit of speed I had left. When I couldn't run any

more I stopped and turned, winded and gasping for breath. I was afraid I go back home...I couldn't run into those things again. It was really turning into a terrible evening.

Without knowing quite where I was headed, I found myself down on the pier. It was getting light in the east even with the spitting mist. I heard a strange moaning and thumping a ways ahead of me. When I got close I saw what it was and hunched down behind a fence and saw Mr. Pyman. He didn't look well at all. He already looked thin after just a few days tied to the post there. He was shivering in the cold, moaning and banging his head against the pole. Probably he was losing his mind. Seeing him made me feel pretty awful. Probably it was worth braving the birds to get away and maybe get some sleep before work. Then, with real horror, the clock tower on the pier struck 4. There'd be no sleep tonight. My uniform was already on and I'd have to head back to the station right away to make it on time. And there was old Pyman moaning away. At least he can get some sleep whenever he wants.

I set off for the station in a daze of exhaustion. I had that early morning, tired stomach feeling. The early morning is always a weird sort of time. You eyeball everyone you see on the street to find out if they're going about some business, or stumbling home drunk, or crazy. On the main street, I passed the baker's truck. He was driving up the wrong side of the road. With no traffic, he drove on either side in order to drop off his bags of buns and bread faster, as usual. When I passed, he gave me a tired wink. I often passed him on the way to work. There's a special bond between us early morning workers.

Later, on the coast road out to see Travis, I could hardly keep me eyes open. I didn't know if there was any use keeping them open, since I started seeing things...green flashes out at sea. One, then another. Then a third. I blinked and shook myself. But then I saw it again. Something green glowing out there. Mayhaps I was

dreaming, slumped over the steering wheel back in town somewhere. Or maybe I'd driven into the sea and was dead, and maybe being dead was just like a foggy weird dream that was a lot like our everyday life. To test my theory I shouted out to the sea,

“And what about it Mr. Greeny? Are we alive out here? Or just rolling around in our graves?”

But I didn't see any more green flashes after that. The road drifted on past and I thought about how nice it would be if I were out here with Stormy, watching the stripey red dawn and talking all about the mysteries of life. The moonlight shining on her black hair.

When I got to the fisherman's cottage, Travis was on the shore again with his daughter. Naomi had the spyglass and they both seemed especially intent on looking out at the ocean. When I stopped, Travis was all excited. He walked over with a spring in his step.

“Did you see, Howie? The Falena?”

“The what, now?”

Then he seemed to remember something.

“Ah, nothing, Howie, nothing.”

“Was that one?” Naomi cried out.

“Just a second, love.”

“Just two bottles, Howie, and we're in a bit of a hurry this morning if you don't mind.”

The fisherman was acting strangely again, that was for certain. I made a mental note of it and stored it away for future use. Back in town, I made the usual rounds. I got the usual harumph from Mrs. Noseworthy. I had no idea what the old bat's problem was. But I was getting quite fed up with it, to tell you the truth. I picked up Father Wheelan's fish sandwich and brought it to him. The speed

with which that man got the thing unwrapped and into his kisser always astonished me. These are big, hearty sandwiches with lots of mayonnaise and crusty bread. Usually he couldn't take his eyes off his meal, but today he tried talking to me as he chewed.

"Howie, why don't you come to my sermon this Sunday?"

"Oh, no thanks, Father. It's my only day off and I'm not really a religious man to tell you the truth."

"Don't worry about that, Howie. Services are really more of a social event. You come along. A lot of pretty girls, you know."

And he winked at me, his cheeks full of fish.

Down the road, I got the usual annoyed looks from Mrs. Pyman. She said something about 'don't ever show your face around here you filthy bag of scum.' To which I responded,

"If you don't cancel your milk order, I've got to come, missus. Can't be helped."

Some people you just can't reason with. She and I used to exchange a few pleasantries every morning, but now it's all gloom and long faces. As if it was somehow my fault her husband got caught doing the subversion. And anyways, this morning, I didn't have time to worry about her. I had to screw up my courage to face Stormy and try to explain what had happened. When I got to the tinker's house on Mercy Street, she was outside. She saw me and turned sharply. About to go inside.

"Stormy! Wait"

She turned to face me, not looking happy at all. An impatient look on her face.

"And where were you?"

And that's when I realized: I couldn't tell her where I'd been and I forgot to come up with a suitable fib. So I stood there, mouth agape

like an imbecile.

“Nothing to say? Fine.”

And with that she bolted into the house. I felt suddenly sick and didn’t know what to do. Mr. Greenwood came out, looking a bit sheepish. Not exactly mad at me, but maybe a little perplexed at how to deal with all complexities of his daughter’s love life.

“Just two bottles, Howie.”

He was almost kindly. Maybe he’d understand.

“Mr. Greenwood. Could you tell Stormy...”

“Yes?” He asked.

“Tell her... I’m sorry?”

“Okay, Howie. And I can still look at that radio you mentioned.”

“Thanks, Mr. Greenwood.”

Driving back to the station, in addition to feeling green from disappointing Stormy and her not wanting to talk to me, it also dawned on me that I wasn’t furthering my mission of infiltrating the Greenwood household. What I was I going to tell Corwin when he asked about my progress? Then I really thought I might puke.

I managed to dodge Corwin at the station, at least. I made my way home, feeling as sorry as I could for myself. The whole world seemed a sad tragedy and every shop I passed seemed to be one more piece of evidence that there’s no point trying to make anything beautiful in this world. Even the nice things seemed to make the world a sadder place.

At home, I slumped down in my chair. I thought I’d cheer myself up by reading a few pages of Eliza Pike. Eliza always knew what to do, no matter what the circumstances. She knew what was right and she knew what was wrong and nothing would shake her convictions once

her mind was made up. I'll even tell you a little secret: sometimes when I'm really stuck, I secretly ask Eliza to help me find the way. I know that once I get the red badge and learn all the ropes, I'll be a milkman of conviction and I'll always know exactly what to do and I'll never lose myself again.

In this week's issue, Eliza had to visit this remote town on the northern shore. She went to help a girl who's father disappeared without a trace. She questioned all the people in the town and no one said a thing. Everyone acted just like they didn't even know the man and didn't care a whit about the girl. Eliza knew better, though. They were keeping a secret and probably knew damn well where the father had gone. And she was going to get to the bottom of it. The only clue she had to go on was a glowing whale bone she found stuck in an odd way in the beach in front of the man's house. Like the glowing whale bones they use in the churches, but much smaller. Everyone said he probably just got tired of it all and left. But the girl said he'd left a note. This was a two part story and I'd have to wait till next week for the denouement.

I got to thinking about Stormy, and how maybe one day we'd have a little girl, and maybe I'd go missing and the girl would pine away for me wondering where I'd gotten to, and Stormy might walk the sea strand at night thinking of all the good times we'd had and wondering what shore I might have washed up on. I wasn't about to let those dreams go. So I sat down to write a letter. A sort of poetic and tragic one to let her know what happened and also what sort of a man I was.

My Dear Stormy,

I'm writing you this letter today to explain about what happened the other night. I was all ready to come see you, when I suddenly had to go to work because a man from the Department of Lactic Affairs...scratch that.

Dear Stormy,

You might not know it, but being a milkman carries with it certain infallible and irrefutable responsibilities.

No. She'd never believe it about the milkmen. And we're not even supposed to talk about it anyways. Especially the nighttime stuff.

Dear Stormy,

I sometimes have these spells. I've had them since I was a kid. You see, I'm not from St. Gaff's. Instead, I'm from Mingsbight and not the nicest part of the city either. I didn't grow up with all sorts of fancy things like you. Anyways, these spells are sort of like sleepwalking, except... My family...In my neighbourhood...everyone had at least seven kids. My parents, though only had me. Sometimes when I was a kid I would fall into these episodes...and I would fall very ill and it was very hard to take care of me. I used to cause problems in my sleepwalking.

I barely slept a wink except it felt like I was somewhere else. Somewhere terrible. Once when I was three and a half, I walked out in a storm and slipped into the creek that carried all the waste water from the factories...and still I didn't wake up. But my father was looking for me and he found me and pulled me out before I drowned.

But my parents. They could hardly sleep for all the trouble I gave them. My dad had a good job at the factory, but he told me he couldn't keep it because of me and my god damned spells and having to take time off. He had to get odd jobs after that and work as a maintenance man at an apartment building for the factory workers he used to work with. And he got mad. Every day. And like I wrote above, everyone had all these kids and my parents just had me. Because of me they couldn't have any more. The spells come and go but back then it was something awful. They said I broke a bunch of windows on the street one night and my mom and dad had to pay and not only that but my dad lost his job at the building. And

he came home drunk - which didn't happen all too often, really - and he was yelling and blubbering mad and sad - and he screamed at me. 'I should never have pulled out out of that creek. No one'd be the wiser if I'd let you die that night.'

He didn't mean it, probably, but I ran away then...and I got sucked down into it like always happened...I woke up in a filthy alley behind a pub in the wee hours of the morning. I forgot for a while why I'd run off...I stumbled back home...just as the sun came up I got there. The police cars were outside.

God damn it.

I crumpled up the paper and tossed it in the trash bin. Who was I kidding? I couldn't ever twist the words around to make her really know where I came from, how just seeing her of a morning was the brightest spot in my day. I laid down in my bed. Just staring at the ceiling. I couldn't close my eyes, much less fall asleep. An evening breeze blew in from the street and I had to get out.

I found myself, hands in pockets, just walking in the red starlight. I'd tell you I was walking aimlessly, but I knew where I was going. I walked past her house three or four times...I thought maybe if I could talk to her, she'd see. Some lights were on, but I didn't know which window was hers. I saw a curtain move and stopped, looking up. Her silhouette moved in the window, and I must have caught her eye. My heart froze. I wanted to run away, but I was stuck there. She pulled back the curtain and opened the window.

"Howie? What are you doing out there?"

"I was just walking by..."

"Are you a peeping Tom now, Howie? You're a weirdo, you are. Get out of here."

The window closed. The light went off. I put my head down and

hurried off feeling like I was going to throw up and scream and cry all at the same time. Down on the main drag I got sucked into a pub. The bar was sticky, and the smoke burned my eyes.

“You want a pint there, lad?”

“Just a lemonade please.”

“Lemonade it is.”

I’d never had a pint before, to tell you the truth. Back home, the tradition was for a dad to buy his son his first pint. But that didn’t happen with me. The lemonade was cool. I tried to keep a low profile. Choking back all the old stuff that was bubbling up in me. Trying to stop it from happening again. A long-haired fellow got up on the stage with a guitar...his song rang through me for days to come.

I’ve got mood swings, even in my dreams.

Nobody wants me, even in my dreams.

I amount to nothing, even in my dreams.

I’m bat shit crazy, even in my dreams.¹

¹ Lyrics used by permission of Moody Bear.

5. The Police

I woke up the next morning to the sound of banging on the wall.

I heard the old crone muttering even before I'd opened my eyes. There was some hidden message in the banging. A message just for me... 'You might go mad too, one day, young man. And then you'll see. Then you'll figure it out...you'll understand what I'm trying to tell you with my stick and my early morning mumbles. You'll know what it's like to have all the secrets and not have a soul to tell them to.' It chilled me like the morning rain falling outside.

It would be a cold walk to the station and I was feeling mighty anxious. I spotted the bottle of Podexium on the table and put a couple of drops into a glass of water, just like the doctor'd told me to. You couldn't even taste the stuff. Out on the street it was indeed cold. I had my slicker on but the mist went right through to my bones. I had those stupid files under my arm and couldn't wait to finally be rid of them. I passed the baker on his rounds, dropping bags of buns off at restaurants and stores. He tilted his hat at me and I tilted mine back at him. A block or two further on, under the awning of McGoohan's Fish Market, was old Inspector Piercey, the chief policeman on St. Gaff's. If I didn't know better, I would have said that he was lurking there in wait for me.

"Hey there, Howie, fancy meeting you here."

I stopped and ducked under the awning.

"Hello Inspector Piercey, you're out earlier than usual."

He seemed to take this amiss and gave the ever so slightest hint of a sneer. But then he put his poker-cop face back on.

“The police force never sleeps, Howie. It’s always awake and it’s always watching.”

And he winked at me.

“Well, that’s great to hear, sir, but I’ve got to get to work you know. The milk never sleeps either.”

I started to walk off.

“Hold on there, Howie.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’d like you to come down to the station with me. There’s a certain matter we need some help with.”

“I’d love to sir, but maybe later. I really can’t be late.”

“Are you refusing to cooperate with the police, young man?”

“No sir, but I really can’t be late for delivering the milk, sir.”

“I’ll talk to your boss, son. Don’t give it a thought. He’ll understand if you’re with the police.”

I pondered this for a moment, turned on my heel and walked off down the road. Piercey popped open his umbrella and followed me.

“You don’t want to be doing this, son. You don’t just walk off when the police are talking to you.”

I knew this was a risky move. I’d dealt with police in Mingsbight and knew what kind of snares and nets they could trip you up in. But a sense of duty told me to walk on. I had a higher calling now. He kept walking right behind me.

“Son, you know I could arrest you for this right now, don’t you?”

I bit my lip, said nothing and kept walking.

“We’ve had some reports about you, Howie. People have seen you.”

This was like a bolt of ice through my poor young heart. Seen me where? I wondered. I hardly knew where I’d been half the time, let alone who might have been watching.

“We know your birthday’s coming up, Howie. We know how much you enjoy a nice piece of cake on your birthday, lad.”

At this, I turned and looked at him. His face was glowing weirdly yellow and he was grinning like a fiend. And then I realized I’d been hearing something and it was louder now. Lots and lots of footsteps. Policemen started coming out of every doorway and every nook and cranny. They didn’t have faces, but they were all swinging their clubs. I turned and ran. And I could hear Piercey behind me.

“Son. You’re going to answer my questions one way or another.”

When I got to the station, I stopped and caught my breath. I looked up at old Billy on the wall and his steady gaze helped calm me down. Down the road, Mr. Piercely was walking calmly in my direction, but there were no other policemen. And then I remembered. That must be it. The Podexium. It clearly didn’t sit well with my constitution. I was done with that stuff. I ducked into the station before Piercey could catch up. Inside, I almost bumped into Mr. Corwin.

“Howie, you’re sweating. Is everything alright?”

“Yes sir. It’s just that. Well, The police are after me.”

“What for?”

“Oh I didn’t do anything wrong, sir, not really. I don’t think. But the inspector wants to question me about Billings.”

“About Billings. He told you that?”

“Well, no, but I just assumed...”

“What’s that you’re carrying?”

Just then Inspector Piercey came in. I didn’t think he’d follow me right into these hallowed halls.

“Alright Howie, enough’s enough. Let’s go.”

“What’s this about, Inspector?”

“Police business, Mr. Corwin. We need to question the lad here.”

“You can question him after his rounds.”

“I’m afraid he’ll have to come now.”

“I said, he will answer your questions after his rounds.”

Corwin locked eyes with the inspector, and Inspector Piercey wilted like an old piece of lettuce someone left outside all night.

“I suppose there’s no real hurry.”

And he pointed his finger at me.

“You be sure to come straight to the police station when you’re done here, Howie.”

He tried his best to look authoritative as he walked out empty handed.

“As I said, Mr. Corwin, I didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t know what they want.”

“You just answer their questions, Howie. Now get moving.”

As I made my deliveries, I kept thinking about how one day I’d be a man like Corwin and everyone would do what I said. I’d have an office with big double doors and important people would come from all over to talk to me. I was kind of not paying attention to what I was

doing since I was so caught up in my visions of the future. And I forgot to bring Mrs. Noseworthy the bottle of cream she ordered. She gave me her usual Harumph. But this time, I decided to stand up to her.

“Why are you always so annoyed with me, Mrs?”

“My son wears a real uniform. He volunteered for the war. Now please get my bottle of whipping cream and be off with you. I’ve got an important game of whist tonight and I still have to make the cake. I do not have time to chat with the milkman.”

I went back to the truck for the cream. I thought I’d liven up the old bat’s card game by pouring the rest of the Podexium into the bottle.

“Here you go Mrs. My apologies for the delay. Enjoy your whist game.”

Harumph.

Down the road, Mrs. Pyman drew the curtains closed as I walked up to her door. It was a grand old house, but no one had been tending the yard as of late. Weeds were growing up and the whole place was looking disheveled. I dropped off the bottles. As I was walking back to the truck, she opened a window and shouted at me.

“Don’t ever come back here you louse!”

Mrs. Blackwall, the neighbour, was walking down the sidewalk just then and heard all this.

“Now what’s eating her?” I asked, “It’s not my fault her husband got caught in whatever subversive scheme he was up to.”

“It’s a hard thing,” she responded, “to fall so low in your station. The Pymans were one of the most important families on St. Gaff’s. He was on a lot of municipal committees, you know. So this has all been a great embarrassment to her.”

I drove off wondering if Mrs. Pyman had been down to visit her husband on the pier. Next, I swung by my place to pick up the old radio. When I got to Mr. Greenwood's house, Stormy was nowhere to be seen. I put the milk in the little moving box as usual. Then I knocked and Mr. Greenwood came out.

"Ah, I see you brought the old radio."

"Any chance you could have a look today?"

"Sure, Howie, come around back."

We sat down on a couple of chairs in his backyard. It was like something out of a kids' book. He'd painted all the fences with bright colors and scenes with fairies and unicorn castles on hills. He must have done it for Stormy when she was younger since some of the paint was fading and peeling. And then, of course, there were the bits of machines everywhere. What really stood out was an almost life-sized ballerina on a mechanical pedestal. I guess he hadn't finished it, or maybe it had worked, but Stormy got bored with it. You could see the gears and little wheels in an open part of the pedestal. And the ballerina was starting to rust. Mr. Greenwood brought out some tea and biscuits and I gladly helped myself. He looked over the radio.

"Is Stormy around?" I asked.

"I'm afraid she's... indisposed at the moment, Howie."

Then he looked right at me.

"It's never easy with the women, Howie. I wish I had some advice to give you, but I've never been very adept myself."

I didn't know what to say to that. He got a screwdriver and commenced to taking the frame off the radio.

"This is an older model. Military, in fact. Pretty scarce these days. With metal being so dear, they can't afford to make them

except for the army. That's why...Howie...It seems odd to me that they'd use so much metal to build a machine like the thermolizer that makes the milk safer. I mean...this whole war is about the lack of metal since most of the mountain mines on the continent are used up. They've already cut away most of our iron fences for the war. That thermolizer must have a ton of metal in it. An actual ton. Why? We never had a problem with the milk here."

I was profoundly offended at the implications of what he was saying. But it was my duty to cozy up to the man.

"Maybe you're right, Mr. Greenwood."

"You see that, right Howie? Right? It just doesn't make sense to me. Something very strange is happening with that milk station. And Mr. Pyman. Not at all my favourite person. But I can't see why he'd break in to the station. I've known the man all my life and he's no subversive. He wouldn't break the law to save his own mother. What would he want in there?"

"It is hard to understand why he'd steal a bunch of personell files. Who knows what he wanted with them."

"So that's what he's supposed to have taken. And why on earth would the enemy want the personnel files of a bunch of milkmen on this island?"

I felt my face go red since I wasn't supposed to tell about the files.

"I think he also stole some blueprints. Maybe that was the thing of real value."

He looked right at me again and said, in a pretty confidential way,

"You know Howie, a couple of times, late at night, I've gone down to the pier with some food for Mr. Pyman. I thought no one would be around and that it was inhumane to treat a man like that. The first time I got his gag out and fed him a bit, but he was delirious

and spouting all manner of nonsense. The second time I went down...I just felt like someone was watching. And so I made out like I was just going for a walk. And a little down the pier, sort of in the shadows, I saw that big milkman, Gopher? Ferret? He was just standing there staring at me with his mouth open. He surely gave me the willies. In fact, Howie, I mean to speak to Inspector Piercey about Mr. Pyman and my suspicions about the receiving station."

I put on my quick-thinking cap and circled through the possibilities. If Mr. Greenwood makes himself into a troublemaker by going to the police and complaining to everyone about Corwin and the thermolizer, he'll get himself into a lot of trouble. But then I won't be the one getting him in trouble by finding evidence against him. It will be as if I failed at my mission. But on the other hand, Mr. Greenwood is a nice man and I wasn't sure he deserved all the trouble that was lining up against him.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, Mr. Greenwood."

"And why not?"

"There's something I have to tell you. About Inspector Piercey."

"And what is it, Howie?"

I opened my mouth, not quite knowing what I was going to say

"Well, what if it isn't the milkmen you have to worry about, but the police? They're the ones who took Mr. Pyman away, after all. Maybe you should wait and make more observations."

"Perhaps you're right about that, Howie, perhaps you're right."

He looked a little bewildered by all of this.

"Do you have any more of these biscuits, Mr. Greenwood? They're delicious."

"I'm not sure, Howie, I can have a look."

Then he held up a shiny tube that he'd pulled out of the radio. It was all black and sooty on the inside.

"The valves are blown on this. Not much chance of finding new ones any time soon."

That was really a shame. I thought for sure he'd be able to fix it.

"That's too bad. I'd hoped to listen to a program with it. Well, anyways, thanks for having a look. I guess I'd better get going."

I picked up the radio and left him there in the backyard. I was quite annoyed that I wouldn't have a radio, actually. And the thing was heavy too, so I just sort of shoved it under a bench in the front. Mr. Greenwood wouldn't notice probably amidst all the clutter in his yard.

And then I stopped. I'd forgotten that he was going to go see if there were more biscuits in the house. I turned to go back and saw someone duck away from an upstairs window. It must have been Stormy. Damn it, I thought. I'd better just get out of here. And then I remembered that I was supposed to speak with Piercey right now. So I hopped into my truck and headed for the police station. It wasn't my normal route, and I was driving in an irritated sort of way and I heard someone shouting.

"Hey! Stop!"

I looked in the mirror and saw that it was Dr. Barrett. I forgot to avoid driving down his street. I pulled over and stopped and he ran up to the driver's side.

"Howie, I thought I told you I didn't want to see you driving a milk truck anymore."

"I'm sorry, doctor, I've been taking a different route so you wouldn't see me. I just forgot today is all."

"No, Howie, I don't want you driving at all. Especially not if

you're taking Podexium."

I grinned, thinking about dumping the bottle into Mrs. Noseworthy's cream.

"Not to worry, doctor, I threw it out. It didn't agree with me to tell you the truth."

"Ah. There have been instances of Podexium having a paradoxical reaction."

"I'll say, doctor. It was horrible."

"But you're not supposed to just throw it out. You should have brought it to me for safe disposal. If someone without your condition takes that, they could experience serious side-effects."

I felt a twinge of embarrassment, but what's done is done.

"I just poured it down the drain, doctor. And I haven't had any more spells. Honest."

"Howie. I told you that no one with Ecsteuseus should be driving. I want you to park this thing and I'm going to speak to your manager about this."

This made me pretty nervous. And then an idea struck him.

"Howie, how would you like to take part in an experiment? No medicine. Just talking. Trying to get to the bottom of your troubles using some new methods they've been developing on the mainland."

"Sure, doctor, I'd love to come by for a chat. But I really must get going. Duty calls and all that."

So off I went to the police station. The police office was a very official looking place. Almost as official looking as the receiving station. It was a big squat building right downtown. When I went in, the place was deserted. There was a blonde woman in uniform behind

the desk. She looked bored to death, loading and unloading a gun.

“What can I do for you love?”

“I’m here to see Inspector Piercey. He had some questions for me.”

“Everyone’s gone off to Mrs. Hertle’s house, including Inspector Piercey.”

“What for?”

“I don’t know, really.”

“Will you tell him I was here? Howie Coxwell. I can come back tomorrow if that would be best.”

“Yeah, sure.”

But she wasn’t writing anything down.

“So you’ll tell him? Howie Coxwell.”

“Okay, Love.”

But she just kept staring at the gun. So I left. I didn’t want to get into trouble for not showing up, so I decided to go see what was happening at Mrs. Hertle’s house. As I got closer, I heard gunfire. And Mr. Piercey shouting.

“Ready! FIRE! Up THERE! Again. FIRE!”

And then, there were all these police officers with their rifles and pistols shooting all over the place, up into the trees into the air. And there were all those birds again flapping around. Some were smashing themselves against Mrs. Hertle’s windows. Inspector Pierce’s face was all red and mad. There was a little explosion of feathers in the tree as one bullet hit the bird.

“I got one!” a fat cop shouted.

“No you didn’t,” A tall one said.

And it's true. The bird just flew off. I tapped Inspector Piercey on the shoulder.

"You. I don't have time for you now."

"What's going on?"

"These birds chased one of Mrs. Hertle's cats into her house and now she's trapped in there. Those birds are going to break through a window if they keep it up."

"I'll just head home, then, if it's all the same to you."

"Yes, sure. Tomorrow. We've had complaints about these things all week and we're going to finish this here and now. FIRE!"

So I left them to their futile task. I found myself wandering down by the seaside. It was early evening now. There was a warm breeze coming across town, and it carried with it the sound of rifles. I knew I should have been nervous with the police on my tail and my career perhaps about to be ended. But somehow, I wasn't. It was the time of day when everything seems to slow down. And somehow the sound of the police trying to shoot down those birds soothed my heavy heart. At least I knew the birds were real and that the authorities were going to deal with them. Perhaps everything was going to be okay after all. My eye started twitching. But I ignored it. I picked up a stone and tossed it into the sea. I watched it sink down until it disappeared.

And then I disappeared too...

I opened my eyes and the world was blood red. And I was pushed by a wave...and felt the sand beneath me. I struggled out of the sea dripping with water so red it was almost black. The sky was iron gray with a pinprick of a gray sun on the horizon. I walked along the beach that stretched on forever. Until I saw a brown low rise building with the familiar old brownish red bricks. I knew where to go. I opened the door to the basement and walked in. I could hear

him whittling away with a knife down there. He was on a chair, with his brown uniform, his back to me.

And he turned and smiled. He showed it to me. A little wooden car.

“I made it for you,” he said.

He stood up and was so much taller than me. And we walked out to the front of the building. And there was the apple tree.

“It’s coming along nicely,” he said.

It was the tree I’d planted last spring when I was five. And there we were, walking along through a golden field of apple trees and it was warm. And there were angels in every tree watching us and smiling. My little hand in his big hand. And for the only time in my life I felt safe. It was quiet and we walked on. And I told him about my days. About what my friends in school had been up to. And how one day I would drive a big truck. And he told me I could do it and he hoped I’d give him a ride some day and he’d tell everyone I was his boy. And I told him about old Mrs. Noseworthy and her harrumphing. Until I noticed...His hand was cold...and then it was gone, dissolved into ashes...and I was alone.

The trees turned black and laughed at me. I ran and the trees reached out for me. And I was climbing the biggest tree in the forest. And it was freezing like frozen metal. And I bumped against something...a crust...asphalt...I pushed it away and pulled myself out of the hole in the parking lot of the milk receiving station. I was soaked in sweat and it was quiet. My uniform was filthy with dirt. But I thought I’d still have time to clean it up before tomorrow. I cursed these stupid episodes and the stupid doctor who couldn’t help me and I started walking home, the uniform sticking to me in the most annoying way.

A block away there was the laughing again. But it sounded so

familiar. This wasn't part of an episode. It was real. The cackling got louder. Several people. And there was Mrs. Noseworthy in her underwear with another old woman and two old men all in their britches. Noseworthy had a broom and now she was shouting.

"I want the last piece of cake! Where is it!"

And then they spotted me,

"He's got it!"

And they charged at me. I ran off. It didn't take much to lose them since they were so old and flabby. And I snuck around by the pier. Close to where Mr. Pyman was roped up. But I didn't hear any noise. Until I heard some footsteps. It was two policemen. The tall one and the fat one.

"Bullets went right through em," I heard one say.

I ducked down behind some barrels and watched between them. The police came up to Mr. Pyman, who was slumped against the pole. The tall copper poked him and he didn't move. Then he gave Mr. Pyman a good shove. Nothing. The fat one bent down for a better look.

"He's dead!"

"Come off it, he's just asleep."

The tall cop kicked Mr. Pyman and his head fell back in a horrible rubbery way. It wasn't looking very good for Mr. Pyman.

"Oh good lord, what's next," the tall cop said.

"Do you think we'd better report it to mother?"

"It's not our bloody fault. A ship was supposed to come for him. Should we just leave him? Someone'll find him in the morning."

The fat one put his finger in his mouth and thought a bit.

"It won't look very good if the police was supposed to make sure

he got off to The Rooms safe and sound and instead he died right here on the pier. We have a duty to the townspeople to carry out the law and if they find him here they'll think we're not good at our jobs."

"So what do you suggest we do?"

Then they whispered and I couldn't hear. The fat one untied him. The tall one started dragging a big piece of concrete he'd wrestled loose from the pier's masonry. They tied the thing to his legs and, with a lot of huffing and grunting, they pushed it over the edge. Down it went, pulling Mr. Pyman with it. His corpse made a kerplunk sound, and he was gone. They'd just dumped Mr. Pyman right in the harbour. I'd just witnessed a crime, I thought. By the police. The sneaky bastards. But now I had something on them. I barely noticed the wings flapping behind me...I sneezed and the coppers, who'd been staring at the ripples Mr. Pyman had made, bolted upright. They walked over and I didn't have time to get away and there was nowhere to run.

6. The Church

It was Sunday morning and I remembered what Father Wheelan had told me: ‘Lots of pretty girls there!’ So, despite the weariness of the past couple of days, I decided to attend church service that morning. There was, in fact, only one pretty girl I was interested in and I thought she might be there and that maybe I’d get a chance to talk to her. It was a bright cold fall morning and the town was quiet. I usually slept in as best I could on Sundays, and then had myself a walk along the pier, since I had the whole place to myself. Then I’d read for the afternoon and generally laze around.

I didn’t really know what to expect at church. As I got closer and saw others on their way, it dawned on me that I was grossly underdressed. But I didn’t really own many outfits, and I figured the Great Whaler probably wasn’t so well-dressed back in his time so it shouldn’t bother anyone that I was in pretty regular clothes myself. I imagined everyone would be happy to see me and extra welcoming to have a new soul joining the congregation, but mostly no one spoke to me at all. I supposed it was just the holiness of the place and the day that stifled their enthusiasm at seeing me there.

I hadn’t really ever had a good look at the church before since I’d only been in there during work hours, and I had to rush. But now I could really soak up the atmosphere. The building was like one long hallway with a bell tower up front. The hall, I learned later, was called the nave, which sounded like naval, I suppose because of the seafaring nature of

our religion. There was a choir singing and it was quite a nice song. I took the opportunity to get a closer look at the arches. This being an older church, the arches were, of course, giant whale rib bones. I couldn't even imagine how big the whale must have been. And the bones, like all the old whale bones, glowed green. I went up to have a closer look and to my surprise, when I touched the bone, the glowing got much brighter. I pulled my finger back right away, since I didn't want to cause any trouble. But when I looked to the side, I saw that Travis was looking right at me. He walked over,

“Morning Howie. Fancy seeing you here.”

“Morning Travis. I thought it was about time I started paying attention to the important things in life, if you know what I mean.”

“I noticed when you touched the bone —“

“Oh I didn't mean any harm.”

“It's just a bone, Howie. You can't hurt it.”

Just then Mr. Greenwood walked by with Stormy. He gave me a little nod. Stormy glanced at me but quickly looked the other way. That made my stomach sink a bit...but maybe I'd have another chance later.

“Why don't you sit with Naomi and I.”

I didn't really know what went on in a church service and was glad someone at least could be a bit of a lifeline. So I sat with Travis and Naomi. For whatever reason they sat all the way in the last pew. I saw the rest of everyone else come in. Not many milkmen. But I did see McMyrtle with his parents. They were sort of middling people who owned a dry goods store in town. They sat about halfway to the front. Inspector Piercey came in and that made me nervous after what had happened. He saw me and just gave a sneaky little wink. I'll have to tell later about what happened the other night on the dock. Just before the service began, Mrs. Noseworthy hurried in and took one of the only

places left, plopping herself down right in front of me. Her enormous head mostly blocked my view, so I had to keep shifting to see what was going on.

The choir stopped about then, and Father Wheelan walked out looking much more serene and divine than I'd ever seen him look before. Everyone got quiet and he began.

“Shipmates. Today, on the anniversary of that tragedy which still affects many of our local families, I will discuss The Merchant Bellarmine. Bellarmine, we recall, was a trader in the ancient world. He sailed the known seas and thus met our saviour. He also was the first to record an encounter with the great subaqueous enemy of the Falena. Until he met The Whaler, Bellarmine, nearly alone among his kind, understood the degree to which he'd been living in sin. He was tormented with that demon of the deep night and day. It plagued his days and tormented his nights. Only after meeting The Whaler was he able to defeat the monster. And, more importantly, keep the beast from returning to his dreams and hounding his every step. And therein is a lesson for us.

“We hope to hide our secrets from the world, to bury them at sea, believing they will sink beneath the inky waves never to be seen again. But the Merchant assures us that those depths are the repository of every last sin we commit. They accumulate on the freezing bottom like oily black sludge that, with time, grows and writhes...and bit by bit, day by day and year by year, it grows. Until one day, its sickly yellow eyes open and it shoots forth to tear at our livers and to strike down any sailor who loses his way in a storm. In these black days, when the Falena have forsaken us, The Boggiretch swarm over the sea bottom feeding on carrion and waiting for their time to strike. Recall: Only seven years past, before the shipyard, one of our fishing boats dragged one up in his trap. It killed three men before the harpoons killed it. They're out there. They haunt my dreams as they must haunt all of yours.

“There seems no hope now but in silent waiting and prayer for this darkness to pass. In the waiting time, know that there is a record of our sins built up for us. Ee cannot hide. We cannot escape. It grows and it watches. No matter how deep the sea into which we attempt to drown our secrets, they will all one day return for all to see. The sea will one day run dry and we will stand naked and face to face with the Boggiretch.”

I was pretty tired, so kept drifting in and out of sleep while he told this fantastic tale. Staring at the back of Mrs. Noseworthy’s head, the black ribbon in her gray hair seemed to change into a hideous Boggiretch swimming beneath the iron gray ocean. I sort of dreamed that the monster found Mr. Pyman’s corpse and was eating him. And my mind wandered to the other night when the police had dumped Mr. Pyman into the ocean to hide his body.

I sneezed when one of those damned birds landed behind me. The two policemen walked over.

“What do we have here?”

“A bloody snooper.”

“I wasn’t snooping. I was...passed out. Drunk! I was in the pub and got lost on my way home and just fell over here. That’s what happened.”

“I know you. You were at Mrs. Hertle’s house today looking for Inspector Piercey.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And what did you want to talk to him about, then?”

I’d gotten up and to my surprise, both of the policemen put their arms in mine and we started walking along the pier. They were holding me a bit tighter than was strictly necessary in my opinion, but we seemed to be getting along well despite the circumstances.

“What did I want to talk to him about? Well, I told him that I’d always wanted to join the police force. The milkmen are great. But I always had such respect for you bobbies.”

“Wanted to join the force, eh?”

“Bright boy like you? You’d go far...wouldn’t he go far, Timmy?”

“Oh there’s a bright future for this one.”

Now, I’m not really the nervous type. But something in their tone was making me a bit skittish. Then they ‘walked’ me close to the edge of the pier.

“How bout we give you a few pointers?” The fat one said.

And I sort of saw out of the corner of my eye that the tall one was inching his nightstick out of his belt. It occurred to me that they hadn’t believed my story and were plotting to do away with me like they’d done with Pyman. But I wasn’t about to let that happen. And just to let you know, I didn’t really have any intention or interest in becoming a police officer. So all of a sudden I yanked myself free from their grip and spun around. My back to the water. They both stepped back and drew their nightsticks.

“Listen guys. I won’t say a thing if you let me go.”

But they were advancing on me. Not saying a word. The clouds parted, and the whole pier was bathed in crimson from the red moon. I was getting really scared. Would anyone really care if I disappeared?

“Guys.don’t —”

But then the fat one hit me! On the arm I raised to protect my head! It hurt like hell. These cops were really trying to kill me! Was I allowed to fight back? I didn’t even know. The fat one fainted and

I put my arms up again. But then the tall one smashed me right in the head. I sank down to my knees, seeing stars. I had a hard time, but I got back up. They closed on me again. But now I wasn't scared. I was mad. I felt all the rage of hell rise up in me and I heard an angel's choir in my ears. Deafening. I looked at these two jerks and for the first time in my life, I knew I was in control. I heard water. Pouring like a great sunken ship rising from the ocean. I raised my arms over my head...it was like I was giving them a taste of my nightmares. I felt...power like I'd never felt before. I saw the cops look up. They white as ghosts with terror. And then they just ran off. It was so bizarre. I turned around, and nearly fainted when I saw —

And then Travis elbowed me. I heard the tail end of a snore and realized it was coming from me. Wheelan was still talking away up there. But I guess he'd moved on to more current affairs while I'd been dozing. He was red in the face now and it looked like he was really warming to his subject.

“We've had the iron fences of our houses cut away for the war effort. A lot of us have even given up pots and pans. We've all had to tighten our belts. Make do with less.”

I was puzzled by what Father Wheelan said. As someone who grew up in Mingsbight and through several years of war in the capital, I could say with confidence that this island seemed almost completely untouched by the turmoil on the mainland. But when I looked around, I saw a lot of nodding heads and serious faces. Was I missing something?

“And on this, the tenth anniversary of our declaration of war against our Northern neighbour, the republic of Weyland, I believe it is my duty to remind us of the reasons we are fighting.

“On the surface, this conflict is about metal. With the iron ore in our mountains exhausted, and without any possibility of safely

mining below ground, our great nation of Tow Law stood to lose its preeminent place in the world. Both economically and militarily, our enemies abroad sensed our weakness and began to move against us. And when it came time to ask for aid from our northern neighbor, they flatly refused, leaving us no choice but to take what we needed for our survival by force. For it is a precept of our faith, as well as of human nature, that one may do what is necessary for self-defence.

“But another law of nature, recognized by all men in all times, is the law of gratitude. And, beyond the practical matter of our lack of metal, it is the ingratitude of our former northern colony that we seek, rightly, to punish with all our might. Never forget that we expended enormous resources to civilize the northern barbarian. We gave him our laws, our language, our roads and system of government. And when we requested aid from this nation, a nation mostly devoid of civilized human habitation and rich in untapped resources, we were soundly rebuffed. Weyland may have gained her independence from the mother country, which we always expected she would, when she reached a certain level of maturity. But the ingratitude they have shown to us, her parent for all intents and purposes, is as inexcusable as a child’s slap to his mother’s face.

“Their claims of the sanctity and holiness of their mountains are simply lies, at most the holdover of some forgotten heathen religion they bandy about when convenient, since they do in fact procure ore for the guns and ammunition they use against our people. And never forget the wiliness of our foe. Within a year of our declaration of war, and against all rules of decency, Weyland moved her troops secretly far south of the border by sea and captured a part of our capital Mingsbight.”

At this my mind wandered away from the old preacher...and I remembered being a lad back in Mingsbight. I used to play in the school yard by the gasworks. We lived in that narrow lane. Then the soldiers installed themselves right in the school yard. There was fighting when

some enemy soldiers took over part of the town. Just the outskirts. A school in the next district got bombed and a bunch of the kids who'd survived were sent to our school and they told us all about it. It was about the most exciting thing that had ever happened. There were roadblocks and no one could go to the part of town the Weylanders had annexed. We heard gunfire and saw billowing smoke from the big guns. I'll never forget the smell of burning. Me and some of my friends decided to go on a mission to see the bombed-out school on the other side of the barricades. It was going to be a great adventure. I got my rope and a compass I'd gotten as a gift. And after school, we all gathered in the yard, reviewing our equipment, and were about to set off. I told them I want to be first over the wall. 'Let's wait until dark,' I said. In the back of my mind, I thought I heard one of the girls whisper to her friend. 'Don't let Howie come...He's so weird.' I was going to say something, but then I remembered that my mother wanted me home for dinner. So off I went home in the gloaming as the gaslights came on. I missed the adventure, but I thought it was an important thing to be a dutiful son.

When I got in, there was my mother just putting on her hat. She looked a bit surprised to see me.

"Oh Howie," she said, "your father's working late. There's still some macaroni from last night and a butter tart. I'm going out for a bit."

But that was fine. I had my dinner and flipped through my comic book, "Kid Eliza: Detective Extraordinaire" My favourite of those comics was the one where Eliza is on summer vacation at her family cottage at the lakes. All the fish were missing so none of the kids could go fishing with their dad and she had to find the fish thief, who turned out to be the crotchety old widow Merle who hated all the noise kids made going out in their boats in the mornings. It wasn't as sophisticated as the grown-up serials. But Eliza had always been there for me as far back as I could remember.

And then I woke up again. Father Wheelan was done, I supposed, and everyone was getting up to leave. I got up too and walked out with Travis and Naomi. We had to sort of wait in line to get out, which seemed odd to me. But then I saw that everyone was filing past Father Wheelan. He stood outside and said a few words to everyone. Stormy and Mr. Greenwood were a few people ahead and I craned my head to see if she'd notice me. But she didn't turn around. Mr. Greenwood was looking really animated talking to the man in front of him. I caught one little snippet of what he said.

"No boat took him...woulda heard."

Stormy got to Father Wheelan and I was surprised to see him lean over and give her a little kiss right on the mouth. She looked a little put off. I couldn't hear what he said to her, but after a few words she walked down the stairs into the street. We moved along in the line. And then my heart sank when I saw McMyrtle, who was already outside, run up to Stormy. She said a farewell to Mr. Greenwood, and Stormy and McMyrtle walked off together. I caught a glimpse of her smile and felt like I might throw up. But then it was our turn.

Father Wheelan leaned in to kiss Naomi. I learned later this he did this with every young woman. But Naomi managed to dodge him. She grabbed his hand and stepped back, making it impossible for him to get a peck in without looking ridiculous. It was impressive really.

"You live alone," Travis asked, "don't you, Howie?...Howie?"

I was distracted.

"I do, yes."

"Why don't you come back with us for a proper Sunday dinner? We've got more than enough. It's good to have a home cooked meal sometimes."

I agreed and we took the coast road out to his place. Naomi skipped along. She was a few years younger than me. I thought it would be polite to strike up a conversation with her, even though I didn't really know how to talk to young people. She was throwing stones into the ocean as we walked.

"So how are you liking school, Naomi?"

"I'm the smartest one in my class. Right, dad?"

"It's not nice to say those things to others, lass."

She looked right at me.

"Well, it's true anyways."

"That's wonderful. I was never so great in school myself. So where's your mother at, Naomi? I never see her."

For a split second she froze, and I thought I saw Travis wince a bit. But then Naomi just kept going like I hadn't asked a thing.

"Dad says you found my gargoyle a while back and ended up in the water because you were so scared."

"Naomi..." Travis warned.

"Oh...well...yes...something like that."

"Dad says he thinks you're —"

"Naomi!" Her father almost shouted at her.

"Aren't you going to tell him?"

"Just drop it, lass."

I had no idea what they were talking about. But when we got to the cottage, they made me a cup of tea and I sat out on the porch while they got the rest of the dinner together. It was cool out, but I sipped the tea and that kept me warm. I looked out over the water. I

felt myself relax in the first time in I don't know how long. If I could ever just have a place like this to sit and while away the hours, I'd be the happiest man alive. Travis was a lucky man to have this spot. I imagined myself sitting here afternoons with Stormy inside cooking and maybe a kid playing with blocks on the porch at my feet. And then I remembered. What was that bastard McMyrtle doing with Stormy?

I got up and went inside to ask if they needed any help. But they were pretty much done and what a spread it was. It smelled wonderful; chowder, fish, pastries I didn't know the name of. Fruit. And I saw there was a gingerbread cake for after. I didn't know if I felt right accepting this kind of hospitality.

"It's too much!" I said.

"Nonsense, Howie. We don't eat like this everyday, you know.

A few mouthfuls into the meal, and I have to admit I was eating a fair bit quicker than the others, I burst out,

"This is the best meal I've ever had!" And really, it wasn't an exaggeration.

"Thank you very much for coming Howie. It's good to have some company."

"The people in town hardly ever want to talk to us," Naomi said.

"No? And why not?"

"They think dad and I are weirdos."

"Well...we don't see eye to eye on some religious matters," Travis said.

"But you go to church."

"We do," he went on.

“Dad says he’s the only one who actually knows anything about religion on the island and that includes Father Wheelan.”

“We’ll not discuss religion at the table, Naomi.”

That was fine with me and I concentrated on the meal.

Afterwards, when the sun was setting, I sat out on the porch again with Travis. He smoked a pipe in his quiet way and looked out across the ocean. Naomi did the dishes inside. If only I had a pipe of my own.

“Naomi was right, you know. My views on religion...let’s say, they’re old fashioned.”

I didn’t say anything since I really wasn’t interested at all in religion.

“Do you know what a Seeker is, Howie?”

“I don’t think I do, no.”

“You know about the Falena?”

“Sure, the whales with the glowing bones.”

“The Seekers are the ones who catch them.”

“Right. But the Falena are gone, I thought. So no one catches them any more.”

He thought about this a bit.

“What does your father do, Howie?”

This was a bit of a slap in the face.

“He was...He’s a carpenter.”

“Ah.”

Then we sat there in silence for a while. It was getting dark.

“Come have a look at something, Howie.”

We got up and went to the boat shed. He lit a lamp inside and there was a beautiful fishing skiff.

“Haven’t been able to get out in her as much as I’d like. Just enough for Sunday dinners.”

“I really appreciate the invitation, Travis.”

“Not a problem. You know. Howie, there’s more to Seekers than just catching Falena. The Falena, you see...they’re not entirely of this world. They live...in between. And Seekers...they also live...in between.”

“That sounds awfully strange.”

He ran his hands over the skiff, admiring its lines.

“It is...they often see things no one else does. It makes them...sometimes others don’t really understand what they’re going through and don’t always want to associate with them. Do you see what I mean, Howie?”

“Sure. It sounds awful.”

“There aren’t many Seekers around anymore. Most people don’t believe they exist at all. And when they recognize each other, they’ve got to stick together.”

I was getting pretty tired, to tell the truth, not having slept much the past couple of days.

“That is very interesting. I’m really not up on my knowledge of these things. But to tell the truth, Travis, and I don’t mean to be rude. But I do have to get up very early for work...and it is a bit of a hike back to town.”

He gave a deep, warm smile. His eyes seemed sad to me all of a sudden.

“Of course, Howie. You run along. I hope you’ll join us again some time.”

“I’d love to. The food was just amazing. And tell Naomi goodbye for me.”

Out on the coast road, it was a clear night. I looked up at the red stars. The white and red moons on opposite sides of the horizon. It was quiet but for the waves lapping on the shore. It was almost like time slowed down for a minute and this very solemn feeling washed over me. Looking up at the vault of the sky, I somehow felt like I was still in church.

7. The Story

After work Monday, out in the parking lot, Walker was telling one of his usual tales. Not having a lot to do, I hung around to listen too.

“The guys back then,” he said, “they looked out for each other. There wasn’t a lot of infighting. Course, the job was harder back then. No trucks, no machines. I tell you boys, the easier the job gets, the more it’s all about me me me. But as I was saying, there was a new boss man they’d brought over from the mainland, you see...name of Walsh. Now this Walsh, didn’t like the way we washed the bottles. All done by hand back then, of course. A good bottle cleaner could...”

I wondered why I was sticking around. His stories always rubbed me the wrong way. I spent half the time watching the other milkmen. All wide-eyed and agog at the old geezer’s wisdom.

“So he rigs up this machine,” Walker said, “but the damned thing wouldn’t work. And he says, ‘the belt’s stuck, Smitty. Get your finger out.’ And Smitty says, ‘It’s not stuck...if I let this go...’”

And here it came. The inevitable climax.

“‘Nonsense.’ And next thing you know, there’s Walsh with every damned bottle in the station come crashing down on top of him. Broken glass as far as you could see.”

And everyone laughed like it was the most hilarious thing in the world. And for some reason, I asked,

“And what did you do for bottles after that? Did they have to stop the milk deliveries?”

Everyone stopped laughing. Walker hesitated a second.

“I think we had to get a rush shipment of bottles. We might have missed a day or two.”

And everyone started walking away, deflated. I felt really annoyed. For some reason stories like that always drove me up the walls. They were always so neat and tidy and everything just fell into place in the right way. Mostly I think stories are just someone trying to make sense of a bunch of stuff that can't make any sense. But without the stories, I suppose, their lives would just be intolerable nonsense. I'd heard a lot of stories from the war. It was always, a inch the left and it would've been me who'd gotten blown up instead of such and such, and so on. But we never hear from such and such, since such and such got blown to smithereens.

And what about me and Stormy. Our story, which seemed so bright and promising. It didn't have a happy ending, now did it? And I thought about that peckerhead McMyrtle, still in the station spraying for flies. Maybe it was time I went and talked to him, man to man about stealing my girl. So I flung open the front doors of the station, looking for trouble. And almost ran right into Mr. Corwin.

“Howie. Any news on the Greenwood case?”

Yikes, I thought.

“It's been a while since I've heard from you.”

“I'm on it, Mr. Corwin. I'm pretty sure I'm close to finding what you want.”

“Anything concrete?”

“We had a conversation the other day. And he told me that he doesn’t think the thermolizer is for milk.”

“Really?”

This got his attention.

“Yes, that’s right. He said he didn’t even think it was connected to the milk supply”

“I see. Did he mention what he thought it was for?”

“Not that I recall. But he’s very suspicious about us milkmen. Except me, that is. Since I’ve cozied up to him like you suggested. He was asking a lot of questions about...well, the digging and the hole or whatever it is under your office.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“Nothing! I don’t know anything to tell him. And even of course if I did, I can keep a secret. Mr. Greenwood also thinks there’s something suspicious about what happened to Mr. Pyman. I overheard him at church telling someone that there was no prison boat that came and took him. And he also told me he’d been sneaking food down to Mr. Pyman.”

“This is all very good, Howie. Better than I’d expected, in fact. Has Mr. Greenwood been talking to others about the thermolizer?”

“I don’t think so. He mentioned it to me with a lot of hesitation. Like he was pretty nervous.”

“Walk with me a minute, Howie.”

We walked down the main street together. And I felt proud as could be to be walking with such an eminent figure in our community. I noticed that people on the sidewalk sort of instinctively got out of our way.

“I used to be a young milkman like you, Howie. Bright. Ambitious. I was willing to do anything to secure my place in the organization. I was lucky enough to have a mentor. His name was Shane. Shane Finer. He taught me everything I know. He saw something in me when I was a lad and he took me under his wing. I’m going to tell you a little story about him, Howie. And I’m going to trust that you’ll keep it between you and I. “

He looked right at me and I couldn’t help looking away from such intensity.

“He asked me to come along with him as an assistant in county Trim, on the plains. You might be too young to remember, but there was a pox on the cows there. Cervidious. Not only did it kill most of the cows, it ate holes in the brains of many of the inhabitants. There were lawsuits. Stan and I went as emissaries of the department. Trying to smooth things over. I’d never seen the tears and anguish of the bereaved like that before. Those people were angry. I saw the cows rotting in the fields and I’ll never forget the smell. Everyone was too afraid to go near them. And they blamed us for the milk not being safe. Maybe they were right. And that’s when Stan asked me about my loyalty to the department. How deep it really went. And how far I wanted to go in the organization. I was devoted and willing to do whatever it took. The dairy farmers, who really hadn’t been careful enough with what they were feeding the cows...disappeared one by one.

“No one asked a lot of questions about it. There were rumours. But the official story was that they’d died of Cervidious. No one really cared too much one way or the other. Their lands were repossessed by the department. They’d been leased, of course, after the farmers had gotten into financial straits. As for the lawsuits, I remember Shane telling me, ‘With a sufficient patrimony, they’ll forgive even the death of their fathers.’ So there were payouts. All pretty routine, really. There were a

few holdouts, of course. And...well...let's just say that the holdouts didn't holdout very long. Do you understand, Howie?"

I told him I did. Although I wasn't exactly sure what he was getting at. At this point, we walked into a dry goods store. The one belonging to McMyrtle's folks. Corwin went on.

"Then you understand, Howie, how important loyalty is to me."

"For sure," I said.

"That's good, that's good. And you're off to the radio station tonight night, then?"

"Yes, sir."

Corwin started looking through the footwear section of the store. There was McMyrtle's father standing a ways off, obviously not wanting to disturb two men of affairs in their conversation.

"We might also need you to help out with the...maintenance work...later this week. You're not afraid of going underground, are you?"

"No sir!"

Corwin motioned to the clerk.

"This lad needs new boots. Put it on my account."

"Yes, sir," the clerk said.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Corwin!"

My old boots were, in fact almost worn through. Not that I minded too much. But new boots from Mr. Corwin! McMyrtle's dad was looking at my feet.

"We should have your size. I'll bring a couple from the back"

And off he went.

“Howie. There’s one more thing.”

“What’s that Mr. Corwin?”

“I’ve heard rumours. About you. Wandering in the night. Screaming and acting very strangely.”

I didn’t say anything, but I felt myself turn pretty red.

“Do you ever...during these episodes...see things that aren’t really there?”

I wondered if Dr. Barrett had been talking to him.

“I’ve been seeing Dr. Barrett and he’s been a lot of help. I’m hoping there won’t be any more episodes.”

He looked at me sort of sideways.

“You haven’t seen...anything green? At sea?”

At that point, I thought that maybe he actually wanted me to have seen the green things, so I furrowed my brows.

“At sea? I think I might have...on the coast road. Out in the ocean.”

He seemed to doubt what I said for some reason.

“Okay, Howie. We’ll talk about this again. Enjoy the boots and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you again so much!”

Later I walked out of that store like I was walking on a cloud. I was so proud of these shiny new boots. Even though they pinched a bit, being so new. I had to pass the station on the way home, and lo and behold, McMyrtle was just emerging. I felt about six inches higher and thought to myself, ‘I’ve pretty much arrived as a milkman. I bet I can find a way to get Stormy back from this schlumpf.

“Hey there, McMyrtle.”

I thought maybe he’d notice the boots and say something, but he didn’t.

“Hello, Howie.”

“Are you just getting done spraying for flies?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Heading home, then?”

“No,” he said, and raised his head a few degrees, “I’m going to meet a girl.”

“Oh? Mind if I walk with you a bit? I wanted to ask you a few questions about the spraying. In case I ever have to do it again”

“Sure, Howie. That’s prudent of you. A good milkman’s got to be a jack of all trades.”

So on we walked. McMyrtle yammering away about pipes and nozzles and god knows what else. I was thinking that I would play it cool and show Stormy it was no big deal that she was meeting with McMyrtle. So in we went to the druggist’s. Stormy was there at the bar. She smiled when she saw McMyrtle. Then frowned when she saw me. She spun around on the swivel chair to face us. McMyrtle was just about wrapping up his monologue.

“I hope that was helpful, Howie. I think it’s great that you’re looking to improve your skills. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He turned to Stormy, and I guess he expected me to leave. But I didn’t.

“Oh, hey Stormy,” I said.

“Hi, Howie.”

“You know her?” McMyrtle exclaimed.

“Sure, Stormy’s on my route. McMyrtle here’s been telling me all about how he has to stay late after we’re all done and spray bug juice all over the station.”

McMyrtle nodded,

“It’s a really important job.”

“I hope you washed your hands really well before coming,” I said, “the stuff really stinks.”

I couldn’t help but notice Stormy glance at the peckerhead’s hands.

“Of course I did.”

Then Stormy looked at me.

“My dad says he couldn’t get that radio working.”

“Nope. But I’m sure I’ll be able to afford my own pretty soon. Then I’ll invite you guys over to listen to Eliza Pike with me.”

“You like Eliza Pike?” McMyrtle piped up in his annoyingly superior tone.

“You don’t?” Stormy asked.

“I tend to confine myself to more technical reading. To advance my career.”

“Well, I think she’s great. I love a really strong woman character,” Stormy said.

“Me too,” I said, “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got to get the truck gassed up and ready to go up the mountain. You know I can’t talk about it too much.”

I left there feeling pretty good. Like I’d made a real connection with Stormy. I couldn’t believe we’d never spoken about Eliza before. I can

talk for hours and hours about her. I was thinking I'd grab a sandwich for the road, since I wouldn't have time to go home before heading out. But on the way to the sandwich shop, who did I see, but the old hag who lived next to me. She was using her stick to push some trash off the sidewalk onto the street. There were ribbons and bits of coloured string tied all around the top of the thing. And she had on her usual stained old trench coat. She was all hunched over. And to my horror, she spotted me and started hobbling over. I'd never actually spoken to her, except to yell at her through the walls.

I thought about turning around and getting away, but it would have been too obvious. I stood there and she came right up to me. She didn't smell very good. There was a sort of pleading look in her eyes and she tried to stutter something at me, her eyes kept looking at me and looking away...I just stood there and listened to what she said.

"At the crossroad...at the crossroad, where we get cross because he didn't take off his shoes... and the cross of the mast and yardarm meet, as we go up the hill -...and the hot crossed buns in the mornings... And we cross over and watch for carriages and ducks crossing. And cross your fingers, cross your fingers and you'll be alright.

And then she put her arm on my shoulder and she looked right at me and I saw her eyes were glistening.

"Thank you. Thank you," she said.

And then she smiled and walked off. I guess she really had to get that off her chest. It seemed to make her feel better, anyways. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all. I felt like I'd done another good deed for the day.

I got my sandwich and even left a penny tip in the jar. I got my papers from weird old Beaver and didn't even care about his blank frog eyes watching me. I hopped into the truck and headed off into

the late afternoon redness imagining lying on my bed with Stormy, listening to the radio and then talking all about Eliza and then rolling around in clean sheets.

Up the winding road and past the farms, I waved and smiled at the few farmers and breathed in the crisp fall air, admired the brilliant orange and red leaves on the occasional trees along the road. By the time I got to the radio shed and looked out over the island, I thought maybe there could be a bright future for me after all. I sat on the rickety bench, ate my fish sandwich, which tasted even better than usual up here, and watched the sun tilting over the horizon. The sun was going down earlier these days. Then I ducked into the shed a couple of minutes before it was time and delivered the message to whatever unknown person was sitting in some other radio station waiting for it.

With the message sent, I took a deep breath of the evening air, looked up at the stars that were just coming out, and felt my heart freeze when I remembered that I'd forgotten to fill the truck up with gas. I tapped the gas tank, and it didn't sound like there was much in there. The milk trucks didn't have fuel gauges like the fancy cars in big cities.

The headlights had enough oil to light my way, and I thought I'd be able to coast most of the way down the mountain. I got the truck started and let it roll down the road. I made pretty good progress. Maybe I'd make it, I thought.

I started picking up speed and decided not to touch the brakes. I was a pretty good driver so I thought I could handle it. Around a couple of curves I went too quickly and I felt the truck leaning over a bit too much. I'll admit, this was pretty scary. But I made it. At the big bend close to the bottom, I was going faster than I'd ever gone before. The wind whipping past. As the truck leaned into the curve, I lost my nerve and hit the brake. But a bit too hard. I felt the right

two wheels come off the ground for a second. But I eased off the brake, then pushed it again more gently. That worked. I got the thing slowed down and under control. But I was shaking and sweating from almost rolling the truck over.

But sure enough, as I hit the gas to get back up to speed, the motor sputtered and died. I felt like a right idiot. But there was nothing to do now. I hopped out and looked around. Low hills, a sparse forest, just a few trees here and there, and not a light to be seen. There was nothing to do but start walking. It was a bit spooky for me actually. I'd never in my life been alone in the outdoors at night. I didn't know what to make of all the little noises. But of course there was nothing to be afraid of, I told myself.

It clouded over and got quite dark. I saw something white looming in the distance. Was it moving? I couldn't tell if my eyes were playing tricks on me. As I got closer to the white thing that really did seem to be moving, the trees thinned out and made way for a farm of some kind. I was walking alongside a rough-hewn wooden fence. And slowly but surely the white thing became clear. It was a cow. All white. In fact, as I got really close, I thought it must be the cow Frank had brought to the milk station the other night. Not a black hair on him. I didn't see any other cows around, but there was a laneway. And there was a small sign at the entrance. I got up close to read it: "D.O.L.A. Experimental Farm," it said. How odd, I thought.

Up the lane, maybe 200 yards, was a cottage with some lights on. I started walking, figuring I'd just have to ask for help for the night. If they worked for the department, even on contract, surely they'd be willing to help out an errant milkman. At the door, with my hand about to grab the knocker, the thought popped into my head: If these were department people, I'd be making a very poor impression. And I don't mind admitting that the man from D.O.L.A. had given me the willies. I had no desire to spend an evening with a man such as him.

Maybe a little circumspection was in order, I thought. I stepped off the porch and crept around the side of the cottage. I peered in the window. It was a neat and tidy dining room. A man and woman were eating. Just plain old farmers as far as I could tell. There was a big fire going inside and it dawned on me that I was quite cold. I propped myself up to get a better look at their dinner. It looked good. A thick stew. Potatoes. Big glasses of beer. The woman got up, looked right at my face in the window, turned pale and screamed her head off.

“Jack! Someone’s at the window!”

Jack turned with a shocked and scared look on his face. He was still chewing some potatoes, I thought. I didn’t want to alarm them, so I shouted,

“I’m the milkman! The milkman!”

“Oh my God, Jack, he’s crazy! Get your gun!”

I ran across the field. I heard the door open. Shots rang out.

“Don’t you come back here!” Jack shouted after me.

Not much chance of that, I thought, as I hopped over the fence. Back up the road, I decided it would be best if I just tried to get some sleep in the truck. I sat back down. I was soaked with sweat, and as I said...it was getting cold up in these hills. There wasn’t really anywhere to lie down, so I just stretched my legs out and hugged myself for warmth. The milkman’s uniform is just one layer of thick cotton.

I started to shiver and had no idea how long I’d have to sit here. I contemplated walking back up the mountain to the shed, but it would probably take a good two hours and my only hope of getting back to town was flagging someone on the road in the morning. And no one would be passing up there.

I may have dozed a bit. There seemed to be dreams of Stormy

feeding me stew. I imagined weird calves with fiery red eyes wandering through the woods and looking in at me. I turned and shifted, but couldn't get comfortable. I found myself singing songs out loud to pass the time. I had that tired stomach feeling. I got colder and colder and really had no idea if hours or minutes had passed. The shed it is.

I hopped out and started walking, my legs stiff with cold. After a few paces I heard heavy footsteps in the woods. Some animal, maybe more than one. I didn't know what lived out here. I heard a stick crack and ran back into the truck. I caught my breath and figured it was probably a squirrel or something that just sounded loud in the dark. But I'd just have to stick it out here in the truck. I was more or less asleep when I heard the distant sound of a truck. I opened my eyes, and the horizon was pink. I hopped out and waved the truck down. It slowed and stopped. A potato farmer poked his head out.

“What's the trouble there, young man?”

I made it into town and was a bit late to my rounds, but I made them all. I had to tell Frank about what happened. He didn't seem as annoyed as I thought he would be. He had to come with me in another truck with a can of gas. Then we'd both drive back together.

“Hold on. Just want to grab a few cans for the road,” he said before we set off.

As we pulled out of the station, he cut a hole in the beer can with an opener, and as he drove, he held the beer between his legs like an expert. To my surprise, Frank was quite a conversationalist and seemed to take an interest in me. We spoke about the town. He was new here too. He'd come over with Corwin and was used to city life, like me. But he seemed to like the island so far. He was a few tins in when he got onto real milkman business.

“I hear you're going to be going underground with us before too

long. Good on you, lad. You must've impressed the old man. Between you and me, there's going to be some personnel changes over the next little while. The old man wants every milkman to be...part of the program, so to speak.

"Listen, I'll tell you what. When you're down there. You might see things you ain't expecting to. But a milkman. I mean a real milkman. If you're going to be one of us. You keep your cool. You'll get the hang of it. Just be patient. Don't ask too many questions. Be loyal. And don't talk about it with no one."

The next day, I was back at the druggist's with Stormy and McMyrtle. They were staring at me all agog and wide-eyed.

"When you're underground, you see a lot of strange things. I certainly did. But the real milkman doesn't flinch. Now, I can't get into what we do down there. Even if I could tell, you might not have the stomach for it. But I heard it from Frank that the ones who can't keep their cool won't be milkmen much longer."

"I don't believe it," McMyrtle said, "Why would milkmen be going underground?"

"Why would milkmen have to go to secret radio stations to deliver strange messages? And didn't you ever hear all that digging just after Corwin arrived here?"

"What did you see down there?" Stormy wanted to know. She inched a bit closer to me when she asked and she was looking at me like I'd just arrived here from the moon.

"Can you two keep a secret? Come with me."

It was evening and getting dark. I took Stormy and McMyrtle to the far end of the parking lot. I took the cover off the hole in the ground.

“If you really want to know what it’s like, lower yourself down there.”

McMyrtle looked very sceptical. But Stormy was fascinated.

“I’m not going down there,” McMyrtle declared, “It’s not allowed.”

“Suit yourself. Only a real milkman can handle it, like I said.”

“Are you going to do it?” Stormy asked him.

He was looking a bit green. But Stormy was looking at him with those big imploring eyes. He sucked his breath in. I had some matches from home, which I gave him. And he got down, hung his legs over the side, and to my great surprise, he let himself slide down into the hole. Stormy and I watched him disappear. I didn’t hear any matches or see any light.

“Albert?” Stormy called.

“Albert?” I asked.

“That’s his name!”

I’d never thought of McMyrtle as someone with a first name. But anyways, Stormy and I stood there chatting until it got dark.

And Albert never came back up.

8. The Dream

“I looked out the window. It was still dark. And I saw someone in a long black coat. He was staring up at me, but I couldn’t really see his face. There was a boat motor in the distance. Probably the noise had woken me up. I just kept looking at him, and he just kept looking back at me. I threw on my uniform and ran outside, but he was gone. It was creepy. But what was even stranger...all those birds. The dead ones. They were all perched along the pier...They weren’t making any noise. I thought they were watching me...One took off and flew out over the sea. Then the rest followed. I just stood and watched them fly into the red sunrise until they disappeared. Somehow I knew they wouldn’t be back.”

“Did anything else happen? Or was that the whole dream?” The doctor asked me.

“Oh, that wasn’t a dream. That was this morning.”

“Are you sure that really happened? Sometimes we can have what are called waking dreams. Especially early in the morning or late at night.”

“Sure I’m sure. I’ve been up ever since.”

He had me lying on a couch. He said this was a new medical procedure he just learned about where he’d ask me questions and get me to remember things. And then, he said, once we’d figured out the root of my problems, they would just unravel like a knot being untied.

He wasn't charging me anything, and his couch was actually more comfortable than my bed at home. And if he could figure out why I had these spells, all the better.

"Dead birds, Howie?"

"Sure. You must have seen them, or at least heard about them, right They've been bothering people in town for weeks."

He looked pretty skeptical.

"I did hear stories. But I didn't put much stock in them."

Now it was my turn to be skeptical.

"But the police spent an afternoon trying to shoot them. You mean you don't believe they existed? What I tell you is protected by client patient privilege, right?"

"Yes...something like that."

"Well, I'll tell you something I didn't tell anyone before. I actually found a small sinkhole in the parking lot of the milk receiving station. I kind of picked at it a bit...and...well, that's where those birds came from. They all came flying out at me...you don't believe me?"

He gave me a sort of condescending look, took a big breath, like he was about to expound on something really important.

"The leading theory in the medical community is that these...stories...visions...are a kind of culturally determined hallucination. There's no question that there are creatures that we don't understand living underground, and that they're dangerous. So dangerous that we don't dare dig very deeply. But just because we don't understand these creatures, doesn't mean they're...monsters... or spirits. Even if a whole society is convinced otherwise. There's no such thing as ghosts, Howie. And that includes the ghosts of dead birds."

I was really surprised at what he'd said and was thinking about how to respond. But it turned out he didn't really want me to respond. He just changed the subject like the matter was closed.

"Why don't you tell me about any dreams you remember."

"Well, doctor, I don't usually remember my dreams."

"But you told me you were plagued by visions."

The episodes. But I think those really happen. I sometimes come to with bruises. I chipped a tooth not too long ago. And look."

I pulled up my pant leg and showed him where the dog bit me. It was mostly healed up. But it looked awful. The doctor looked concerned.

"You should have let me look at that after it happened, Howie."

As if I could afford to go see the doctor every time I got a cut.

"And you should report any strays to the police. Especially if they're dangerous."

"It's okay. He was only after me. And I killed him. I think."

He pursed his lips. I don't think he was taking me seriously.

"Well, why don't you tell me about one of your episodes."

So I told him about the other night, when it seemed like I fell into the ocean, and it was an ocean of blood, and I came out and saw my father, and we walked through the apple orchard. I told him how my dad disappeared, and the trees turned black and tried to grab me.

Dr. Barrett thought about this and wrote some notes. Then he began.

"The new theory developed by Dr. Vankelhoffen and his followers, is that these very powerful dreams are in fact wishes. In those terms, your dream is quite straightforward. You wish your dad was dead."

I jumped at this.

“No I don’t! Why would I wish that?”

“I don’t know, Howie. I don’t know what’s in your mind.”

“Then why did I dream the trees were attacking me?”

He thought another second.

“You wish to be punished for wanting your father dead.”

This line of thinking frightened me. But Dr. Barrett didn’t actually know anything about what happened.

“So it’s all in my head then? It’s not real?”

“I’m afraid so, Howie. Your dreams are just a window into the subterranean part of your soul. Nothing more.”

He turned off the phonograph at this point. Which was a relief. Dr. Barrett loved all the things that came from Brigus: Dr. Vankelhoffen’s new dream theories, and all the weird tuneless music they were making over there. I guess the doctor wished he could go live it up in Brigus, but instead he was on St. Gaff’s taking care of the likes of me. I felt bad for him.

About the same time, there was some kind of commotion outside the doctor’s house. We heard a cry for help and Dr. Barrett ran to the front door. I got up more slowly, since I’d been lying down for a while now. When I got to the front room, I was completely shocked to see Mr. And Mrs. Mullen dragging McMyrtle, unconscious it seemed, into the house.

“We found him like this!” Mr. Mullen said.

“Passed out by the rubbish heap.”

The rubbish heap was on the edge of town.

“Help me get him on the table!” The doctor said.

The three of them hoisted Albert up. He seemed to be a rather heavy fellow, despite how lanky he looked. Maybe it’s because he was so completely limp.

“Howie! Some help, please!?” The doctor shouted at me.

I grabbed McMyrtle’s arm, and we got him up. It had been two or three days he’d been missing. It caused a lot of problems down at the station since the rest of us milkmen had to cover his route. And we had to help the police look for him. At least we wouldn’t have to scour the outskirts of town anymore. The doctor got a candle and opened McMyrtle’s eyes.

“The pupils are dilating. He’s not dead.”

Now that I got a better look, McMyrtle was really pale and awful looking.

“We don’t know how long he’d been there. We tried to talk to Morley...but you know how he is.”

Old Morley was the one who took care of the town dump. But he wasn’t very good at his job. He always talked about how he was writing a great tome of a book about the orbits of the moons and he shouted at anyone who requested that he do his job and dispose of some of the trash mountain piled up outside his shack.

“He’s apoplectic. Severely dehydrated. Malnourished. I’ll have to feed him with a tube.”

The doctor was rooting around in his cabinet. Looking for a tube, I suppose. When he’d found what he was looking for, he ran into the kitchen.

“Damn it! Nothing here”

Then he came running back in.

“Howie! Go down and get me a bottle of milk! Quickly! I don’t think he’s got much time.”

“Sure thing, doctor!”

The doctor’s place was only a couple of blocks over from the milk station. On the way, I was thinking about what the doctor had said. Was it possible that my spells were just in my head? If that were true, I wouldn’t have to worry about them so much. But really I wasn’t convinced. Billy was looking particularly cheerful in the red afternoon sun when I got to the station. I tipped my hat to him and went in. Beaver was the only one still there.

“Corwin wants to see you,” he said.

I couldn’t imagine what he wanted me for, but I went over to his office and knocked on the door.

“It’s Howie!”

“Come in!”

I went in. It was always dark in Corwin’s office. He had the curtains drawn all the time. Wood panels. A small gas lamp on his desk.

“Have a seat, Howie. You’ve been doing a job for us. Don’t think it’s going unnoticed.”

I felt a warm glow spread over me as I sat in one of the red leather chairs.

“I don’t mind telling you that I’m seriously considering you for a red badge. We’re unexpectedly shorthanded, as you know. And war is good for promotion. More importantly. It’s very difficult to find someone...like you.”

Now the warm glow felt even warmer.

“We protect our own, Howie. Becoming a milkman. And I mean

a real milkman, means you're part of a brotherhood that extends far beyond the shores of this island. It's a lifetime commitment. Do you have any family, Howie?"

"Well...none to really speak of, no."

"Good...good."

"I'd like you to be here tonight around midnight. In uniform."

"Yes sir!"

"Also. The situation with the police has escalated. It's a nuisance more than anything. But it's a nuisance we have to take care of. I need you to tell me who might be speaking to the police about you."

I furrowed my brows and told him I'd work on thinking about it. I was about halfway home when I stopped in my tracks. I was so excited about what Corwin had said, I'd forgotten to tell him about McMyrtle. And then I remembered that I was supposed to get milk for him. I ran back to the station, but it was closed. I ran back to the doctor's.

"Howie! Where have you been?"

"The station was closed...I went door to door asking for milk...but no luck."

From the look on his face, I didn't think he believed me. I could see that Dr. Barrett already had a milk bottle upended on some contraption and that it was dripping into a tube going into McMyrtle's mouth.

"Luckily the neighbour had some."

The Mullens were gone.

"It's okay, Howie, you can go. I'll do my best with him."

Having done my good deed for the day, I made my way to the

druggist's. I'd been meeting with Stormy there the past couple of afternoons and now it was like a standing date. We decided not to tell anyone about what happened to McMyrtle. People might get the wrong idea. And, as Stormy said, he did go down there with an act of his own free will. I went in, and there was the usual crowd. Stormy and her friend Molly were at the bar.

"Hi Howie!" Stormy said.

"You'll never guess where I just was."

"Where?"

"At Dr. Barrett's. The Mullens found McMyrtle. He was passed out in the dump. Nearly dead. The doctor needed my help to save him. It was hard work, but we got him stabilized. He looks awful. All pale and haggard. But I managed to get some milk into him. To fight off the dehydration."

The girls were wide-eyed.

"Can we go see him?"

"The doctor said McMyrtle needs his space for at least a few days. He wants me to check in because, like I said, he needs my help. But it's best if no one else goes there."

"Did Albert say what happened to him?" Molly asked.

Stormy and I gave each other a secret look.

"He was passed out. Paraplectic, I think the doctor said. He didn't wake up yet."

"Wow." Molly said.

"I got the new issue of Eliza," Stormy said. "We can read it together later!"

She handed me the latest issue of the Tow Law Runner, opened

to the page with Eliza . It was a picture of her in a deep dark jungle with a machete in her hand. Just then Ryan, a milkman about my age walked by.

“You read Eliza Pike? She’s for girls.”

“No she’s not,” Stormy said.

Ryan huffed and walked off.

“Some people don’t know anything. I have to go to the ladies room.”

When Stormy was gone, Molly leaned over to me.

“Do you want some advice? You should kiss her.”

“I’ll kiss her when the time is right.”

From the look she gave me, Molly definitely thought I was chicken. But just between you and me, I hadn’t kissed anyone before and I was a little nervous. Later, we were all talking when Naomi came in. She didn’t hang around with the rest of everyone else. She just went to the pharmacist, Mr. Goucher, and was getting some kind of medicine.

“She’s so weird. Always dressed like a fisherman.” Stormy said.

Naomi saw me and waved. And I waved back.

“You know her?”

“Sure, she’s on my route. Us milkmen get to know everyone.”

Later, Stormy and I were walking downtown. It was late in the afternoon. I was supposed to be walking her home, but we just ended up walking all over town. I told her my dreams about the future and she told me about hers. And I think we were both trying to shape them so

they'd run together. She said I should go with her one weekend up to Skaw, where her aunt lived. Not the one who died, but another one. We could sneak into the lighthouse on the end of the island, she said.

We were getting close to the pub I went to a while back, O'Heathers. I mention it because we saw Inspector Piercey walking towards us from the direction of the pub. And he wasn't walking very steadily. He saw me and made a jagged sort of beeline for us. Stormy leaned in and held my hand and I could tell he was already making her nervous.

"Hey there Howie. You're in for it now, Boy-o. You thought we were done with you, hey?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll see!"

And with that he staggered off down the road. Stormy and I were still holding hands and they were so warm and sweaty.

"What was that all about?"

I puffed out my chest and tried to look like a ruffian.

"The coppers are always harassing me. They know they can't boss me around, on account of me being from a rough part of Mingsbight. I don't take any guff from 'em. He ain't got nothing on me."

With that, Stormy pinned me to the wall of a shop.

All of a sudden, I felt like the world disappeared and I was floating and warm and dizzy, like I'd gone to heaven. It took me a bit before I realized she was kissing me. I could feel her tongue and smell her hair with some strawberry or vanilla perfume. We were holding each other's hands, fingers interlaced and I could have stayed like that forever.

"Milk 'er for all she's worth, milkman!"

We were right beside the bar, and I guess some guys had come out and saw us. Stormy and I opened our eyes and we looked at each other right up close. I'd never noticed just how green and pretty her eyes were. We didn't look at whoever made the comment. We just giggled and kept walking, hand in hand. And I don't think I'd ever been so happy in my entire life. After more waking, and a couple more kisses, we got to her house. One last kiss.

“Good night, Howie.”

“Goodnight, Stormy.”

I stepped down from her porch. It was dark now. And there, standing in the middle of the road, was the man in the long dark coat. He was watching me. I couldn't see his face at all. I started walking home and I could tell he was following me. I didn't really feel like being home alone with this strange person on my tail. I still had my uniform on, so I just went early to the milk station for my meeting with Mr. Corwin. When I was within Billy's reassuring gaze, I felt safer. I knocked on the door. Frank was inside. No one else was there. It was still a few hours until midnight.

“Hey young fella. You're a real keener aren't you?”

“Listen, Frank. I think someone's been following me.”

Frank was usually pretty easy going and joked a lot. But you could tell you didn't want to cross him. He was a big guy. When I told him about being followed, he got really serious.

“Where?”

“I don't know where he is now. I saw him outside my window this morning, and then on the street when I was coming here. He just keeps staring at me.”

“All right, let's go.”

We left the milk station and looked around. We walked around for a while, but didn't see the man again. Frank was getting less tense.

"I think he's gone. Let's head back. Actually. You had any dinner?"

We got sandwiches and just sat around chatting. I told him about Stormy.

"Good job, buddy!"

It was getting close to midnight when he said,

"Listen, Howie. Tonight we're just checking in on the old girl, okay? So nothing too crazy. But since it's your first time...you just hang back and don't do or say anything, okay?"

I didn't say anything. I must have looked a bit spooked.

"Hey, relax. You're with us. It'll all make sense eventually. Trust me."

We went outside and waited for Corwin to come out of his office. Beaver and Walker were there. And to my surprise, Ryan was there, too. He also looked nervous. We weren't really buddies or anything, so we didn't say anything to each other. Frank went over to Corwin and said something quietly to him. They were both looking at me. I couldn't hear what Frank said, but I did hear Corwin.

"It's under control."

When it was time, we entered Corwin's office. Everyone except Ryan, who they left outside to guard the way I'd done before. I knew it was totally illegal to be underground. No one was allowed to dig, let alone go exploring. But I was with sworn officers of the department of lactic affairs, and they worked for the government.

All the milk facilities were nationalized when I was a kid. Corwin, Beaver and Frank put on great flowing robes in silence and lit lanterns. Then Corwin pulled back the curtains and I was surprised to see that instead of windows, there was a great wooden door. Corwin took a key out and unlocked it.

Then we all filed into the darkness. They walked slowly. It was hard to see the ground as we went down a set of wooden steps. A very long set of stairs that still smelled of new lumber. They steps were wide. About five feet across. But there was no handrail, and you couldn't see the bottom, or anything else for that matter. No walls. The lanterns lit us up, but nothing else. After a while, it was like I couldn't make sense of what was up and what was down. I got dizzy. But if I just kept looking at the steps and nothing else, I was okay.

At the bottom, we walked out onto some gritty black sand or gravel...It was like being on a rough beach but so black I could hardly see anything beyond the light of the lamps. We walked on. Our feet sank into the sand, which made it slow going. And there were rocks I tripped over in the dark. The others seemed to know the way, but I had no idea how. It was cold, there was no wind and the air was weirdly thin.

Still, I felt like I knew something about these underground places none of the others did. And it scared me. We walked. I don't know how far. Maybe it was only a few steps, but in the dark, creeping along, you couldn't tell. The lanterns hardly cast any light. I was shivering. It seemed like we were walking alongside a lake of black water. I felt dark green eyes peering out at me from the water. There was a barely visible grey glow coming from underneath the surface.

And then I was aware of large objects, like trees. Black, stretching up beyond the lantern light. Once we got to this forest-

type place, Corwin stopped. I was at the end of the procession. I started hearing whispers. My imagination, probably. It was almost like they were saying my name. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the red eyes of the doberman. But that was impossible. And I wouldn't have been able to say anything even if I'd wanted to. Corwin's voice shattered the quiet:

“Mamifa.”

He took a milk bottle out of his robe...it was glowing....green...Somehow the air seemed warmer. There were footsteps. Something big was coming. Then, somehow out of nowhere, several blood red eyes opened a few feet above us. I almost yelled at the sudden awareness of a huge bulk standing over us in the dark. There was a deafening snort. I could smell the thing's humid, putrid breath. My mouth was still open, but no scream came out. I felt the blood drain from my face as I realized what I was seeing. I froze and stared. In the darkness it was hard to make out. Huge muscled legs...it was on four legs and it loomed over us. Corwin held up the milk bottle...the thing saw it...and lowered its head...glistening leathery skin. A slobbering mouth opened and a gory tongue eased out. Corwin poured the contents of the milk bottle onto the lapping tongue. The thing was huge, with two enormous horns...vaguely bovine...but with six eyes. It slurped up whatever kind of glowing green milk that was. Corwin, I couldn't believe my eyes, went under the thing and ran his hands over what must have been its belly.

“It's not time yet,” Corwin said.

Then the thing turned its gaze to me. And it screamed. I don't know if you've ever heard a cow scream...but this was much much worse. It took a step towards me, thrusting its awful head at me. I couldn't stand it anymore and ran...in the black...I fell, scraping my leg on a rock. I tried to run back the way we'd come, but in the pitch I couldn't tell. Frank, holding a lantern, ran after me.

“Howie! Stop!”

“It saw me!”

I followed the shore, if that’s what it was, and found the stairs. Thanks mostly to Frank’s lantern. But Frank stayed at the bottom and I ran stumbling back up the stairs.

I got to Corwin’s office and didn’t stop. I ran outside and right past Ryan, who was huddling against the wall to keep warm. I ran out onto the street. There was a heavy rain. Thunder. But it felt better to be here on the surface with the clean sea air and rain. I was getting soaked walking home. Then someone sidled up to me with an umbrella. It was Mr. Florsham.

“Howie! What’s wrong, lad? You’re having a night terror. Wake up, Howie!”

“I’m awake...just had to get outside for a minute.”

He looked suspiciously at me and glanced down at my leg.

“You were screaming. And your uniform’s torn. Your leg’s bleeding. You wear your uniform to bed, Howie?”

“I haven’t been home yet.”

“Ah. Let’s duck under here.”

We got under the awning of a shop. I was shivering with cold again. Mr. Florsham had a heavy coat on.

“You need an umbrella if you’re going to walk in this weather, son.”

“Oh, I just forgot. I don’t have one.”

He chuckled at this.

“Well, which is it?”

“Which is what?”

“Never mind, Howie.”

He looked closely at me.

“How’s the bite?”

“The bite?”

“A dog bit you. You showed me, remember?”

I did not remember, which made me pretty nervous.

“You’re getting to be quite the nighthawk. Just like me.”

I’d more or less caught my breath by this point and hadn’t really been following what he was talking about.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Howie. But...maybe you need some help. With your nights. To sleep better.”

And then it dawned on me: It was Florsham. He’d seen me. It was him who was talking to the police.

9. The Milk

So there I was. Standing under an awning in the rain with the retired professor Florsham. My brain was racing. I'd just had one of the most terrifying experiences of my short life with the milkmen underground and that awful slobbering animal. And I'd run away, which was not good. And I'd kissed Stormy, which was good! But right now, I had to focus on the sneaky professor. It was time for one of my crafty interrogations.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Howie. But maybe you need some help. With your nights. To sleep better."

"And what kind of help would that be, then?"

"I can't say as I'd be the best one to talk to...clearly I'm not the best sleeper myself. But Dr. Barrett has given me certain tinctures and remedies in the past. They might work for you."

"They might, Mr. Florsham, they might."

"Particularly with the sleepwalking. You could hurt yourself again, you know."

"What? What do you mean, sleepwalking?"

"I'd just assumed...no one's ever told you you sleepwalk?"

"Not at all."

"Ah. When you told me about the dog biting you, you weren't

making a lot of sense. And look at your uniform, son. You're a mess. I would talk to the doctor."

"Did you talk to the police about me?"

"What? No. Why would I talk to the police about you?"

"About Billings. The murder of Billings?"

"Heavens, no."

But then he gave me a sort of strange look. Like the wheels were spinning a bit faster. By turns there was fear and then defiance in his eyes.

"If you're not sleepwalking, what exactly are you doing out here? It must be two or three in the morning. No umbrella...uniform torn."

He took half a step back. He'd clearly been a good-sized fellow in his prime. Bigger than me. But hovering around 70 by now, I could probably knock him over if I had to. There was a big puddle by a storm drain beside the shop. That's where I'd aim if I had to.

"You did speak to the police, didn't you? What did you say?"

He shook his umbrella back open and stepped out into the street.

"I've got to be getting home, Howie. Goodnight."

He walked away. I didn't know what to do. If he'd already spoken to the police, there was nothing I could do about it now. I was trying to decide if getting one hour of sleep would be better or worse than getting no sleep at all when Frank found me. He had an umbrella.

"Hey buddy. What's going on?"

He collapsed the umbrella and joined me under the awning.

"I was just...I couldn't..."

I didn't know what to say. I started to shake again. Maybe from

the cold or just from everything that had happened.

“I told you it might get a bit tense down there. Listen, Howie. Hey, it’s all right. Look, no one was expecting her to go after you like that. It’s a lot to take in. I get that. Corwin gets that. We all see a lot of potential in you, kid. It’ll all make sense after a while. But the one thing you can’t do. You can’t just run off...that makes everyone nervous, okay? Cause if you take off like that, we don’t know where you’re going or what you’re gonna do. Right?”

I nodded...

“Right.”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me hard in the eyes.

“Hey. We’re way past the point where I have to tell you not to mention this to anyone, right?”

I looked back, right in his eyes, so he’d believe me.

“Of course. But Frank. What the heck is going on down there?”

There seemed to be a shadow of doubt in his eye still.

“I’m gonna leave it to Corwin to get into that. Just know that you’re...safe...down there. When you’re with us.”

I didn’t respond.

“Why don’t you go home and clean up. If I were you, I’d go see Corwin after your shift. Let him know you’re still onboard. That there’s nothing to worry about. Right?”

Back at my place, I put the wet uniform on the radiator by the window hoping it would dry off a bit before I had to go. The rain was slowing down outside. I laid down on my bed. I was so tired. But every time I closed my eyes, I would see that thing and jumped awake.

In the morning I was the first milkman at the station. I wanted to get on the road a bit early. Get out of town and out into the open air where I could think a bit. The rolling of the truck seemed to soothe my mind. With the red stars all around before the dawn, it was like being in another world. I kept going over and over what had happened underground. Now, I've had my spells. Dr. Barrett told me they're all in my head. Travis had some religious explanation I didn't quite understand. I thought I'd seen creatures during my spells. But I'd never seen anything like that creature. I'd heard about them, of course...they pop up sometimes in sinkholes. But in the past ten years the numbers have dropped off for reasons no one knows. There were so many questions swirling around, I didn't even know where to start.

Why were the milkmen going down there? What could they want? And why were they bringing bulls underground? What was the green stuff? And what was it Corwin saw in me that he wanted me to be in on whatever they were doing?

I didn't think I could really ask Corwin or Frank, never mind any of the others. But maybe I could ask Travis. He seemed to know a lot about these things and he was eager to talk about them too.

When I came within sight of his cottage, I could have sworn I saw...perched on the house...dark winged shadows...staring at me. But as I got closer, they sort of disappeared into the chimney smoke.

Then I heard a scream. It was Naomi's voice. She sounded terrified. The lights in her room were on. I stopped the truck and ran to the door. But Travis opened it before I could knock.

"Howie. You're early."

"Got an early start...is everything okay? I heard..."

"It's okay, Howie, nothing to worry about. Naomi's...she's sick. But she'll be fine."

“Are you sure? She sounded...”

“I’m sure, Howie...listen...we can talk about this another time. We should talk about this another time. But I’ve got to get back.”

“Okay, I’ll drop off the milk...I just wanted to ask, though...Last night...I wanted to ask about what you were telling me the other time...Have there ever been any...sinkholes on the island? Have you heard of anyone...going down there?”

He was really looking at me now, piercing with those blue eyes.

“Howie. I’m glad you’re coming to me about this. No one is allowed underground. But I’m telling you. Hou Howie, must never ever go underground. Do you understand me? It’s not the same for you. And now —”

Another scream cut him off.

“I have to go, Howie. Come back on Sunday. We’ll talk more. Just be careful. And don’t trust anyone who tells you to go underground.”

With that he shut the door. I dropped off the milk and started driving back to town. But now I was even more confused than before. Surely I could trust the milkmen. I supposed I’d have to wait until Sunday to figure out what he meant.

When I got over the hill where my engine had stopped a few weeks ago, I slammed on the brakes. Up ahead, there was a police car stopped on the side of the road. And there, standing beside the car, was the man in the black coat. He was just standing there facing me. There wasn’t much I could do. There was no other road back. Maybe I could just drive by fast and leave him there.

I put the truck in gear and started moving, picking up speed. As I got closer, I tried to make out his features, but couldn’t in the morning glare. But he was waving his arms. And then I saw - it wasn’t a man at all. It was a woman. And she was shouting for help.

I stopped the truck a little ways past the police car. I looked back and saw her running up to my truck.

“I’ve got a flat tire. I’m going to have to ask you to drive me back to the police station in town.”

I did some quick calculations and realized that taking her to the police station would throw me way off schedule. Especially with covering part of McMyrtle’s old route.

“I can drive you back to town, but the station’s pretty far out of my way.”

I pointed at all the milk in the back.

“Pretty tight schedule. Because of the milk.”

She hopped in beside me.

“This is official police business.”

She took out a shining gold badge.

“Superintendent Mowbray. Mingsbight Police Service. We’ll go to the station.”

I figured I was already in enough trouble with the police and Mowbray seemed pretty serious. So off we drove.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Coxwell. I’ll speak to your boss, Mr. Corwin, about this and make sure you’re not penalized.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I came out here to talk to you. I knew this was your first stop and that you’d be coming back this way. I don’t like interrogation rooms. Too impersonal. This way we can relax. Chat.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I was feeling less and less relaxed.

“What part of Mingsbight are you from, Mr. Coxwell?”

“I’m from county Buckle.”

“Nonsense. I know that you lied on your application to become a milkman. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Are you here about Billings?”

She looked over at me. I was sweating like crazy, and I could feel my face going red.

“We’re just chatting now, Mr. Coxwell. Just getting to know each other. So how do you like being a milkman?”

“It’s great.”

“So you deliver milk. Do you have any other duties?”

“I was a fly sprayer for a while.”

“Yes. I always marvel at how clean and efficient modern milk stations are. Do you have any other duties there?”

“No. Just delivering milk.”

We sat in silence for a while. She just looked out over the sea.

“All this fresh air must have been a shock for a boy from a factory slum.”

“That’s for sure. I deliver to the fisherman first because it’s so nice to be out here when the sun comes up.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“So tell me about your boss, Corwin. He arrived shortly after you did, correct?”

“That’s right. There’s not much to tell. He’s a good boss.”

We were getting into town at this point, and I was really looking forward to dropping her off.

“I don’t know if you knew this, but Corwin’s from Mingsbight too. He was quite high up in the department of lactic affairs. And then they transferred him here. Not sure if it was some sort of punishment. If he made some sort of mistake — “

“No chance.”

“No?”

“No way. Mr. Corwin’s the most impressive man I’ve ever known.”

She studied me a bit after I’d said this. Which I probably shouldn’t have.

“I mean he’s the best boss I ever had here. I mean anywhere.”

“I see.”

Again, we rode in silence through the town. Just before we got to the station, she said,

“Mr. Coxwell, I’m sure we’ll be speaking again. But if you happen to notice anything unusual going on with your colleagues, I’d like you to come down to the station and let me know. It’ll be just between you and me.”

“Okay, but I don’t think I’ll notice anything unusual happening.”

As she was getting out at the station, she stopped and turned.

“One last thing, Mr. Coxwell. You seem like a nice young fellow. Just remember that being a milkman is a job. Nothing more. Milkmen are not above the law. No matter what anyone tells you.”

I kept thinking about what Mowbray had said the rest of my rounds. It was clear that she was after me because of Billings. Piercing though all the hints she dropped, her theory seemed to be that I killed Billings because I thought that as a milkman, I was above the law and that Corwin was the one who put that thought there.

After my shift, I went to see Corwin. In his office, I was about to sit down like last time.

“You can stand, Howie. This won’t take long.”

“Yes, sir. About last night. I’m sorry for running away like that, I just...I didn’t mean to...”

I was actually hoping he would interrupt me and say, ‘That’s okay, Howie. Happens to everyone. Don’t give it a second thought.’ But he just sat there staring at me.

“It won’t happen again. I mean if you want me to go down there again. Which is up to you, of course. I didn’t know what to expect. And that...Mamifa...looked like it was going to attack me.”

“Anything else you wanted to mention?”

“No, that’s what I wanted to mention.”

“Okay, then, Howie. I’ll speak to you later.”

I just sat there expecting more.

“Okay, Howie. I’ll speak to you later.”

He was repeating himself which I interpreted to mean that he wanted me to get out. Which I did. Just as I stepped out, I remembered that I’d forgotten to mention the police superintendent who was asking about him. But I thought he’d be annoyed if I knocked again, so I just left it. I had this terrible sinking feeling as I left. Like I’d disappointed my own dear dad through some act of cowardice. I knew he believed in me and I had to think of a way of restoring that proud glint I’d once seen in his eye.

I was completely exhausted when I was done with Corwin. I knew Stormy would be expecting me at the drug store. So that’s where I went. Hopefully I wouldn’t bump into any more people who wanted to

ask a bunch of complicated questions or just stare blankly at me. She was really happy and excited to see me. She was telling me all about her day. The garden and the kooky things her dad had been up to. But I just kept thinking about that monster coming at me. And about Corwin's curtness.

To my horror, as Stormy was talking, I watched Professor Florsham come in. He spotted me at the bar. He went to the druggist and handed him a paper. A prescription, I imagined. But he kept looking nervously at me the whole time he was waiting.

"...and I thought, if you don't have to work for the weekend, maybe you could come with me?" Stormy was asking.

I'd only been half listening.

"Come with you?"

"To Skaw! When I visit my aunt next."

"But...where would I stay?"

"I told you - I'd sneak you into the guest house. My aunt doesn't go out much anymore, so she'd never notice!"

My mind turned to Stormy...the guesthouse...the possibilities...

"I'd love to!"

But then I saw Florsham looking right at me. He was talking to the druggist, who was also looking right at me. I didn't like this at all.

"Stormy. Will you come with me? I have to talk to you about something."

She gave me a big smile.

"Of course!"

I didn't really know what I was going to tell her. I wanted to tell her everything. But I didn't know if she'd believe any of it. What

was really scaring me now, though, was going to jail. I didn't know what to do about the policewoman. It was a bit warmer today after the rain, so Stormy and I sat on a bench in front of the town hall.

"How come you seem so distant?"

"Oh...I just came from seeing Corwin. Last night I kind of screwed up with something, and now he doesn't want to talk to me so much."

"Does that mean you won't get a red badge?"

I winced.

"It might. But on top of that, I think the police are after me. You remember when that milkman was killed? Billings?"

"Yes."

"I think professor Florsham has been telling lies about me. To the police. Saying I had something to do with it."

Her eyes got wide.

"And did you?!?"

"No!"

I decided to come clean with her.

"Sometimes, I...sleepwalk. And I think I was sleepwalking the night Billings died...and I must have bumped into Florsham."

"Sleepwalking...so that's probably why you were walking up and down my street that night? After you stood me up?"

I blushed.

"Probably. That makes sense. But now the police have brought over some superintended. They think I killed Billings and that the milkmen made me do it."

"Is that what happened?"

“No! I don’t think so. But I’m pretty sure Florsham’s been talking and that’s why they’re after me.”

She thought for a minute.

“Did you tell Corwin that Florsham’s been saying things about you to the police?”

“No. What if Florsham’s...I mean...I don’t want Corwin to be even more annoyed with me.”

“But if the police think Corwin told you to do something like that, don’t you think he’d appreciate knowing about it?”

“That’s true. But they might...I don’t know what they might do to Florsham. He seems like a nice man.”

“Do to him? What are the milkmen going to do to Florsham? Look, Howie. You have to look out for yourself. If you tell Corwin about Florsham, you’ll probably impress him. And you’ll prove your loyalty. What if Corwin finds out that you knew about all this and didn’t say anything? Then you definitely won’t be getting any promotions. I say you do what you have to do to get ahead. It’s not your fault that Florsham is spreading lies...but you can’t let yourself get in trouble because you’re worried about Florsham or what Corwin might think. You should tell Corwin right away.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“You should go right now. Do you think Corwin’s still at the station?”

I nodded. She hopped up and held out her hand to me.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

As we walked to the station, hand in hand, a feeling of pride welled up inside me. I had a girl who really cared about me. Who would stick up for me. And who knew what to do. I felt like we were a team and

together we'd build the future I'd spent so much time dreaming about.

I was a bit nervous when we got to the station. But with Stormy standing there, I had to knock.

"Yes, Howie? What is it?"

And then I spilled the beans in a big heap, all about Florsham and the police superintendent Mowbray, and even about my sleepwalking. He raised his eyebrows.

"Florsham...and he was there when you were standing guard? The night we brought the bull down?"

"Yes."

"You should have told me all of this earlier, Howie. But we're still in time. This is good work. You go on home. I may have something for you to do tomorrow."

I walked out with my chin held high. I told Stormy that it had gone well, and we walked back to her house feeling invincible. By the time I got home, though, I just about collapsed from exhaustion. I ate half the fish sandwich I'd bought on the way home and fell into a deep dark sleep.

I woke to a loud banging on my door. I got up to open it. I had no idea what time it was. Frank was there.

"Hey buddy. Uniform on. We got a job to do."

He came in and sat on my bed while I got dressed. He flipped through my magazines.

"So what's this about?"

"You'll find out."

So off we went. It looked to be about 11 at night. A few people

were out and about. Not many. But I did notice a few wary glances at us milkmen. It must have been a bit strange to see us in uniform walking around at this hour. But no one stopped to ask us about it. We went through a neighborhood I'd never been to before. Pretty nice houses. Some a little worse for wear. Sort of like where Mr. Pyman lived, but everything was a bit more run down. We knocked on the door of one house. I didn't bother to ask whose it was.

To my great surprise, Beaver answered the door. He didn't say anything. But Frank walked right in and I followed. In the living room, I froze at the scene in front of me. It hit me all at once - this was happening because of what I'd said earlier. These were real live consequences. There was Corwin in an easy chair, looking quite at ease. I caught the tail end of what he was saying,

"And according to him, every sovereign executes his office of supreme pastor by immediate authority from the gods?"

And there was professor Florsham sitting opposite him in another big leather chair. He was sweating and I thought maybe he was shaking. The room was lined with bookshelves. All sorts of ancient tomes.

"Yes, that's right..." Florsham managed to get out.

"And this is one way the sovereign avoids having any power bases form besides himself?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"Fascinating. Howie! I'm glad Frank found you. So the professor here was speaking to the police about you?"

Florsham looked at me, shocked and afraid. I swallowed hard. I knew if I sounded wishy washy now, there's no way I'd have any future with the milkmen. I remembered what Stormy told me: 'you've got to watch out for yourself.'

"Yes, that's right," I said. "He's the only one who could have

known about...me being out that night.”

“What about it, professor?” Corwin asked.

“No! It’s not true. That’s what this is about? I never spoke to the police. To tell them what?”

“You knew about the dog bite. You think I killed Billings!”

“I do not! I never thought any such thing!”

“Professor, we’re sure Howie here had nothing to do with Billings’ death. But I’m also sure that once the police make up their mind about someone, they’ll do everything they can to force a round peg into a square hole. And if they’re getting their theories from you, and if you’re the only supposed witness...well, I’m afraid we have to look out for our own.”

“But it’s just not true. None of it!”

He looked really agitated now and Beaver went and stood beside him. I guess to prevent him from jumping up or anything. Corwin studied Florsham.

“I’m going to take Howie’s word on this, professor. And furthermore, I don’t believe you. Beaver?”

Beaver put his big fat hands on Florsham’s shoulders. Frank went over and helped restrain him. Corwin had a bag beside him I hadn’t noticed. From it, he took a milk bottle. But the milk was a brownish color with chunks floating in it. And some sort of scum on the top. Corwin popped the top off. He held the bottle out to me.

“Howie? This is your problem. And now you can solve it.”

I was half-frozen with fear. Like as if I was on a stage in front of hundreds of people all of a sudden. My vision narrowed and I felt heavy and light all at the same time. I forced my legs to walk over and take the bottle. It was heavier than it should have been. Corwin, Beaver,

Frank and Florsham were all looking at me. I took a step towards Florsham. Then another. He was struggling now, but it was no use...

When I was a kid, I'd sometimes get lost in Mingsbight. I'd go for long walks after school, just daydreaming about this and that. And if the wind was blowing too hard or cold down one street, I'd just turn in another direction and see where I ended up. At this moment, I felt like the wind had just blown me in here to Florsham's living room and I was all of a sudden really awake for the first time in a long time. Maybe ever. I had the bottle. Frank was holding Florsham's mouth open and Florsham was struggling, looking me right in the eye. I could see his fear. His disbelief. And his sadness that all that knowledge he had in his head, all those books he'd read, places he'd been and things he'd done...it was all about to disappear, choked out of him while us milkmen watched.

10. The Trip

I was about to pour this lumpy, milky-brown concoction down the old professor's throat. Beaver was holding the old guy in the chair and Frank had his mouth open. One hand on the upper jaw, one on the lower.

Everyone's eyes were on me and I could hardly get my legs moving. Professor Florsham was struggling, but between Frank and Beaver, he couldn't move. When I got really close I tilted the bottle a bit. But I couldn't get my hands to actually pour the stuff into his mouth. Frank was staring hard at me.

"Do it," he said under his breath.

With all my will I pushed forward and sort of fumbled the bottle. It's like time slowed down. The bottle was about to fall. Frank instinctively shot his arm out to grab it. I grabbed it too, and between us, we almost dropped the bottle again. Meanwhile, with only one hand holding Florsham's jaw open, the old professor bit down on Frank's hand. Frank yelled.

"God Damn It!"

When I had the bottle securely in my hand, Frank punched Florsham in the face really hard. The professor was disoriented for a second and his mouth fell open. And really fast, Frank grabbed my hand and we stuffed the bottle in Florsham's mouth. I'm sorry to say, because it was pretty gruesome, but we actually knocked a few of his teeth out in the process. Florsham was choking on blood and

the milky concoction. I was shaking but couldn't move. Florsham got a bunch of the milk down and Frank, Beaver and I all let him go.

He fell to the floor, twitching and writhing. It was really the most horrible thing I'd ever watched. I felt like I was going to throw up. But also like I was sinking through the floor. It was as if the lights got really dim and as Florsham stopped moving around so much, I saw...It was like a thousand little hands reaching up through the floor and sucking him dry like an old prune. And then I think I blacked out for a second, because Frank suddenly had both his arms under mine and I was leaning back on him. Corwin was standing now and hovering over me. I looked up at him and put on a serious looking face.

"I did it," I said. "I really did it."

But Corwin raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips.

"Hmmm," he said, "Get to the station and bring a truck here. Park it outside."

I looked one more time at the old professor. The gaping hole of his mouth all red with white frothy stuff seeping out, and the dead eyes. The whites of his eyes were a weird green colour now. My stomach convulsed and I threw up a bit on the carpet. Corwin jumped back, obviously disgusted with me.

"Get moving."

I got out as fast as I could, wiping my mouth with my sleeve. And then wiping my sleeve on my pants because it looked pretty bad. I tried hard to get my breath under control as I walked. But I really couldn't stop shaking.

I had to cut across downtown to get to the station from Florsham's house. It was Friday night, and a lot of younger people were out and about. I was walking down the main street in a daze when I heard,

“Howie!”

I turned and there was Stormy with Molly and two guys I’d never seen before. Stormy was running towards me. She gave me a big kiss on the cheek, which I probably should have reciprocated.

“Hi Stormy.”

“What are you up to? This is Rick and Leo, from high school.”

“Hi...I’m just getting a truck...”

“What for?”

“Just...in case I wanted to go anywhere...”

“Really? Let’s go to my aunt’s this weekend! With your truck it’ll be so much better than the omnibus!”

“I’m not sure...” I said.

“Can I come, too?” Molly piped up.

Stormy rubbed her hand on my chest.

“I was thinking it would be just the two of us!”

“Ohhh!” They all said...

“So? Can we do it?”

“Sure...we’ll go for a drive.”

“Okay, I’ll come meet you in the morning!”

Then Leo got an idea, “Why don’t we go with you now and we all drive around town in the milk truck!”

“No...No, I have to...take care of something...and I’m pretty tired...”

“He gets up really early for work. And he’s up for a promotion.”

“That’s right...I’ve got to go...”

I kept trying to keep my arm with the puke on it behind my back so no one would see.

I gave Stormy a bit of a hug and wandered off. I could hardly focus on whatever they were talking about. Behind me, I heard Stormy explaining that I got pretty tired in the evenings.

Later, I parked the truck in front of Florsham’s house and knocked on the door. Beaver opened.

“Where have you been? And what are you doing knocking? Get in here.”

I didn’t really want to go back in, but what could I do? Inside, Corwin was gone, but Frank and Beaver had wrapped the professor up in the living room rug and tied it up with some string. Frank was sitting in Florsham’s chair sipping what I assumed was Florsham’s whiskey. He held up the glass when he saw me.

“This guy knew his whiskey. Alright, Howie. Let’s get him onto the truck.”

So we dragged him onto the truck. As he were carrying him down the steps, a lady in the house next door came out with a watering can, even though it was pretty late at night. She looked over at us with this alarmed look on her face.

“Get back inside, you.” Beaver hissed.

And back in she went, looking pretty scared too. So on the truck Florsham went. I hopped in the cab and Frank came up to the window.

“Just drive a few miles out of town and bury him. The ground’s not too bad for digging a few miles north of here. Make sure the hole’s a few feet deep and not close to the road. The truck should be

able to go off road far enough to get where you need to go. If you get going now, you should be able to get back before the sun's up and no one'll be the wiser."

Then he grabbed my shoulder through the window.

"Do a good job with this. Corwin's gonna be impressed."

So off I drove. And almost right away I nodded off. I figured the smartest thing to do would be to get an hour or two of sleep before going off to bury Florsham. No one would interfere with a milk truck on the street.

So back home I went. I put down my head on the pillow and it felt like an instant later that there was a knocking on my door. I opened up my eyes and could see that it was early morning. I dragged myself to the door. I hadn't taken off my uniform. And there was Stormy standing there with Mrs. Somertag, the landlady.

"I hope it's alright, Howie," Mrs. Somertag said, "she said she was a friend of yours."

"Of course, thank you. Come in!" I said to Stormy.

I had a moment of panic. I'd slept in. The body was still in the truck out front and I was supposed to go away with Stormy this morning.

"Do you sleep in your uniform?" Stormy asked after Mrs. Somertag was gone.

"No! I just...got so tired."

She had a look at my place. It didn't take long since it was only the one room. I guess to her fancy eyes it looked a little rough around the edges with the old sausage wrappers and my mattress that was sort of sagging.

"Did you bring that from home?"

She was looking at the whale painting on the wall.

“No, it came with the place. It was easier to rent a furnished room, you know?”

“Sure. It’s...small. Maybe we can find something better when you get promoted?”

“Oh sure. I didn’t plan to live here forever!”

“Well, are you ready to go?”

“Oh...yes! Can you go wait in the hall and I’ll get dressed?”

“Umm. Okay.”

“Or you wait here! I’ll go to the bathroom down the hall and get changed. Here, look at my Eliza collection!”

I pulled out all my magazines from under the bedside table and grabbed my other clothes and left her there. I figured she’d be more comfortable in my room than in the hall. Especially since when I opened the door, Mrs. Somertag was still standing there. I think she might even have been listening.

“Howie, she seems like such a nice girl. But I want you to remember that this isn’t a house of ill-repute. We don’t want to be getting a poor reputation.”

“Of course, Mrs. We’re just going away for a little trip and we’ll be on our way shortly.”

“No sleepovers, okay?”

While I got dressed it occurred to me: I could just bury Florsham up north when Stormy was with her aunt. Problem solved! When I went back to the room, Stormy was looking out the window.

“Who’s that weird old woman hitting your truck?”

I rushed to the window, and sure enough, the old crone was whacking the truck with her stick.

“Let’s go!” I said.

I rushed out the door with Stormy right behind me.

“Hey! Get away from there!” I shouted.

Now she was poking the rolled up rug with her stick! She turned to me and grinned with that gummy half-toothless grin.

“Like a book. So much knowledge between the covers,” she mumbled.

I didn’t really want her going on in that vein, so I just said,

“Hop in, Stormy, let’s get going.”

And off we drove in the early morning sun. The red moon just sinking over the sea. I’d never been north of town. It was rocky, with bits of rocky land sticking out into the ocean. There were a few trees, but they were all low and mossy. I guess the weather was too harsh for them to grow very high. Both of us were silent...just enjoying the ride. When the sun was up a bit higher, Stormy looked back.

“Why is there a rug in the truck?”

“The rug? It’s just a rug...for Frank. One of the other milkmen. Someone on my route didn’t want it and I remembered that Frank really wanted a rug for his place. So I picked it up...to surprise him. I just didn’t get a chance to drop it off yet. Hope it doesn’t rain.”

“You’re a good friend, Howie. Loyal. Not like Albert.”

“Not like Albert?”

“I was meaning to tell you...Albert told me, before the accident, obviously, that after Billings died, he found some papers beside him. He took them and looked. And they were about you. It said you were

from county Buckle and not Mingsbight. I told him it was probably just some mistake, but he was really mad when Corwin made him spray for flies and you got to do that secret mission to the radio station. He said he was going to tell the police, because if you lied on your application, maybe they'd send you to the army, he said. He was really jealous of you."

That peckerhead...so it was McMyrtle who was talking to the police...I started to get this weird sinking feeling in my stomach as we drove. I had to really work to keep the rage and shock off of my face.

"You okay?"

"Sure. Just, I think I swallowed a bug."

"Eww."

"You are from Mingsbight, right? Not Buckle."

"It's true...I lied on my application."

Stormy thought about this.

"Well. You were just looking out for yourself. I think that was smart."

We hit a big bump in the road, and there was a big thud as the carpet in the back got jostled around. And an empty milk canister fell over and making all sort of noise. Stormy looked back.

"The rug's really lumpy. Is there something inside?"

I felt myself blush.

"Oh, that's just some potatoes. A couple sacks of potatoes. Since I had the truck, I decided to get a bunch...Can you stay here a second? I just want to tie down the carpet. Just wait here, okay?"

So I pulled over and hopped out. I went around back. I got a bit

lightheaded and really scared when I saw that the carpet had come undone a bit and you could see Florsham's feet in his professor's socks sticking out. I was busy stuffing them back in and trying to tighten up the strings when right behind me -

"Everything okay?"

I just about jumped out of my skin. Stormy was right behind me, but I didn't think she saw anything.

"Oh, yeah. Just securing this load back here."

I hastily shoved the feet under the rug as best I could.

"I needed to stretch my legs!"

And when I turned around, she was actually stretching her legs. I was mesmerized. No one was around on the road in either direction, so I walked over and kissed her. And I wanted to kiss her more, but she pulled away.

"The day is young!" She said with a big smile on her face.

We got back on the truck and kept going. I felt like we were settlers from yesteryear going off into unknown lands to forge a new start for ourselves. Stormy put her hand on my leg. It was warm and that warm feeling filled up my whole brain.

We passed through the town of Skaw. It was just a couple dozen houses and a few stores. A stone church. An old couple of the street stopped and stared at us. Probably they'd never seen such a fancy truck before. We didn't stop. As we went on, the trees got bigger. Spruce tress, Stormy said. And Stormy told me all about her aunt.

"She and my uncle got married pretty young and had a boy. My cousin, Patrick. My uncle had some kind of business with the woodcutters and he was pretty well-off. I don't remember him, really.

Patrick, my cousin, was never quite right in the head. He used to love sneaking up on people and scaring them. Then one day, they found my uncle. He'd hanged himself from a tree in their yard. Some people in my family said that Patrick did it. But my aunt just told the police he was upset about something, and if the family says it's suicide, they take the family's word for it. But after that, Patrick got worse. He would just follow my aunt around the house without saying anything. Or he'd jump out at her with a knife and just start laughing. Her nerves were shot, and she's still pretty jumpy."

"And where's Patrick now?"

"He just got a job as a wood cutter. I don't know where he lives now. He still visits my aunt sometimes. I've only met him like once or twice. But listen, we're getting pretty close. Turn down here."

So I turned down a wooded lane.

"Turn down there."

So I turned down another track. Hardly a road. It obviously hadn't been used for a long time.

"There's an old shack down here that no one uses. Okay, just stop here."

So I stopped and we hopped out.

"You sure you'll be okay? I'm sorry I can't bring you up with me right away."

"Of course! I love the outdoors."

The plan was for Stormy to pretend she took the bus and got a ride up here from town. The lane to her aunt's place was two miles, so not too long a walk. I was supposed to leave the truck here where no one would see it. I was supposed to just wait here in the woods until it started getting dark. Then I'd sneak up to the guest house

close to the aunt's place and Stormy would let me in.

It all seemed perfect. I'd get to spend the weekend up here with Stormy and I could bury Florsham on her aunt's property when everyone was asleep.

So Stormy gave me a big kiss and walked up the main lane.

And I stayed behind with the truck. And the rug. I told Stormy I'd be fine and tried to pretend I was a rugged woodsman. Even though, to tell you the truth, I'd never even been in the woods. And now that I was here alone, it was so quiet. It bothered me. I sat in the truck for a while, but it got pretty boring. Especially since, right in front of the truck, out the windshield, was this tree with a big branch sticking straight out to the side. It looked like the perfect tree for hanging someone and I couldn't stop thinking about Patrick and Stormy's poor old uncle getting hanged by his own son. I kept thinking about Patrick just standing there, watching his dad struggle. It was too awful. So I went for a walk. It was a bit cold out. And I was getting cold, too. I went to the end of the track. It was pretty overgrown. At the end, there was a red wooden shack, like Stormy said. There was a window, half-broken, and I could see a hole in the roof. I thought maybe I could go sit in there and warm up, but I was a bit afraid to just go in there. I argued with myself: you're a man now, Howie. You can at least have a peek in the window.

So I looked in. I could see some glass bottles that looked pretty old and dusty lined up against the wall. A bunch of rusty springs that must've been a mattress. There was a table with a couple of magazines on it. I decided not to go in. Nowhere to sit.

I was walking back to the truck, but something was bothering me. A ringing started in my ears, and I figured out what was bothering me. The magazine. I had the same one. The Tow Law Runner, with the Eliza Pike stories. It was from a couple of weeks ago. So the shack

can't have been that abandoned.

I quickened my pace. But I heard something in the woods. Probably a racoon, I thought...the sky was getting dark, but it was not even lunch. And then there was a little boy in front of me, maybe five or six. He was dressed in a blue knit sweater and he had new boots on. He just stared at me. I was frozen on the spot.

"Are you going to come back?" he asked. And I knew what he meant.

"No."

And he frowned and looked sad. Little tears welling up.

"Why not?"

I couldn't answer.

And the boy burst into tears and ran into the woods. I ran after him. But he was gone. I kept looking for a bit. I saw him out of the corner of my eye, running. I chased, and he went down some stairs. It was like there'd been a building with a basement here. The building was gone, but the stairs and hand rail remained, covered in pine needles. I didn't want to go down there, but my legs took me anyways.

It wasn't very deep. And there was a dim light from outside. A long corridor with shelves. My eyes got used to the light and I saw that the shelves were lined with skulls. Some with bits of leathery skin still stuck on them. A few had sunken bits of brown matter that used to be eyes. I spun around to get out, but the corridor just kept going in both directions. Then I realized I'd been hearing something for a while now. A violin. Haunting. It sounded like home somehow and I followed the sound. The corridor looked like it curved down as I walked and it made me a bit dizzy.

Eventually I saw a very tall man with a top hat. His back was to

me, and he was playing a violin, walking away from me.

“Hey! Hey! Can you hear me?”

I ran to catch up, but he stayed ahead even though he was just walking. I got dizzy with all those skulls watching me. And we came out onto the beach. He was playing for a whaling ship that was on fire a mile or so off the coast. I could feel the heat. I stood beside the violinist and we watched a mast fall, embers crashing everywhere. The little boy came and stood beside us.

“The oil catches fire very easily,” he said.

I looked down at him and he looked back up at me.

“You’ll have to be more careful next time”

Then there was a dull crash and the stern of the ship sank into the water. Everything went black.

I got up and looked around. I was really horrified that I was in the middle of the woods and didn’t know where I was at all. I thought back on everything I’d read about wilderness survival, but all that came to mind was that I should follow the sun. I noticed when Stormy and I arrived, the sun was sort of in front of us coming through the windshield. So I thought if I kept following the sun, I’d eventually come to the aunt’s house at least. I was really cold, and it was getting to be late afternoon I figured. I tried not to get too nervous. But I was shivering.

I walked and walked. There were a few clouds, but I could still figure out the right direction. The birds in the trees seemed to be laughing at me. And I was getting really hungry. I eventually came to a big rock wall that I definitely hadn’t seen before. I clambered up to get a good look around. But all I could see were trees. And, in the distance behind me, I could see the shore. It dawned on me that I might have been going the wrong way. The wind was picking up and now my hands were numb. There was nothing else to do but

start back. So I climbed down...and went back the way I came.

Without the sun in front of my, guiding my way, it was hard to know if I going the right way. I started to try and think about what I would do if it got dark and I was still wandering around out here. I thought I could build a shelter by breaking some branches and leaning them against a tree. Maybe I should start now while I can still see? Can you freeze too death even if it's not quite freezing out? I was also thirsty. Would I die if I didn't get anything to drink until tomorrow?

The sun all of a sudden seemed to be setting really fast. Like it was playing a joke on me. I found a little clearing. I grabbed a couple of branches with needles on them. I thought they'd be like blankets. There was a dead tree with some limbs that looked like they might work for a shelter. So I grabbed one and yanked on it. But I couldn't get it to break. So I sort of kicked at it. But I just ended up hurting my foot and falling. And the branch was still just sticking out of the tree there. It was getting scary.

But then I heard something. Glasses clinking? Certainly something glass. So I walked towards it and, through the woods, I saw a big old wooden house and a small a little ways beyond it. This must be Stormy's aunt's place! I felt a lot better already.

I snuck over to the guest house. It was dark inside so I thought Stormy must not be done dinner yet. I sat on a rock a little behind the trees so no one could see me. I was really shaking uncontrollably now from the cold and everything else. I was so cold I thought maybe I should just go knock on the door and claim to be a lost traveler. But I was scared Stormy would be annoyed with me. So I jumped around to get warm. But it just made me colder. But then, like the sound of heaven above, I heard the door of the aunt's place open and saw Stormy come out. She had a plate with wax paper on it. My dinner! I stepped out from the trees when she got close.

“Hey!” I whispered.

“Hey! I’ve got your dinner!”

She opened the door and we went in. It was cold in there, but warmer than outside. Stormy lit a lamp and then looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

“You’re freezing! Oh poor guy! Were you just sitting there the whole time? I’m sorry.”

“No, I went for a walk. Just to look around.”

She felt my hands and then looked actually nervous.

“I’m going to get some tea for you. There’s wood there. Can you start a fire?”

And she left. I threw a bunch of logs and old paper in the iron stove. There were some matches. It felt so good as the fire got going. And then Stormy was back with the tea. I drank it and ate the roast and potatoes and bread she’d snuck out for me. It really was like being in heaven.

After eating, I was really tired. The guest house was one big room with a stove, a table and chair and a big bed. Stormy had a deck of cards and she showed me a game that involved trumps and a bunch of other rules. We joked and talked about all sorts of things. We might as well have been the only people left on the earth. It was black outside, and it felt so good to be in here with a fire crackling.

Later, Stormy made me turn around while she put on a nightgown. When I turned around and saw her in it, my breath caught in my throat. I didn’t really have any pyjamas, but she didn’t mind me getting into bed in my regular clothes. It felt like we were grownups with our own house and it was the most thrilling thing that had ever happened to me. She turned out the lamp, and we found each other’s lips in the dark. I was overwhelmed. I ran my fingers through her hair and down her

back. I might have been shaking a bit, not really knowing what to do. I put my hand under her night-gown.

“Mmm mmm,” she said.

And I pulled my hand back and contented myself with kissing and holding her. She smelled like bath powder and blue flowers. I knew I’d never forget it. We eventually fell asleep. When I woke up, she was getting dressed.

“I have to go back to the house. We don’t want her coming looking for me!”

“No, we don’t.”

“But you can sleep more. I’ll come back with some breakfast in a while, okay?”

She left and I dozed a bit before remembering I had a job to do.

I hopped up, pulled my shoes on and snuck out. I walked down the lane, shivering in the morning cold. But walking on a lane was much less worrisome than walking aimlessly in the woods, so I was all right. Although I did start to worry when I remembered that I hadn’t brought a shovel to dig a hole with. Maybe I could use a big stick. But when I got to the truck, the rug was still there, but it was unfurled. I got really worried and ran over.

I took me a moment to figure out what I was looking at. Parts of professor Florsham, ripped up and spread around. But only a few bits. And the rug was all bloody. And then I figured it out. Animals must have gotten at him in the night and dragged the parts away. I was just staring at his arm. The forearm bones exposed and tendons sticking out, when it hit me. Now I wouldn’t have to bury him.

This was turning out to be the best weekend of my life!

11. Confession

I opened my eyes. It was dark. It stank of fish and burnt wood. I heard whispers. Water. My eyes got used to the dark. I was in the hold of some rotting ship. Parts were black like there'd been a fire. A dim red light came in through a portal.

I took a step. The floor was covered in something wet, chunky. It got a bit brighter and I looked down. It was all guts from some large creature. Piles of white fat. There were dead eyeballs, about the size of my fist. Four or five scattered around and all looking at me. I was frozen on the spot. It got brighter still. Figures in tattered hooded robes were closing in all around me, speaking, but I couldn't understand. A couple had lanterns. They were shuffling, moving closer. One with a lantern got really close. I was shaking. Its hood slipped off. A rotting cow's face grinning at me.

I pushed it aside and ran through the slop to the ladder. I pulled myself up onto the deck. I was alone. The water was still and there was a dense reddish fog all around. I felt someone watching me. I turned around. I couldn't make out what was there. Something huge looking down at me. Maybe a face examining me. I could see through the fog, round, gold rimmed spectacles, the image burned itself into my brain.

And I woke up. In my bed. That was a couple of nights ago.

I should have been sleeping, probably. But tomorrow is Sunday and I'll sleep in, if I can. It was around midnight. I was up on the roof of my building looking out over the sea. Someone sometime had put an old couch up here. It was pretty shabby from the rain and mist, but I felt like a king up there looking out over my domain. I'd never noticed how much faster the red moon was than the white one. There was a breeze here but out at sea, the wind howled and I was mesmerized by the whitecaps. I felt I was the only person in the world here, like the stars were just there for me and no one else. Like the moons were racing inside me instead of way up there. Like the waves were crashing somewhere in my chest. Something kept nagging me in the back of my stomach. I wasn't quite sure what it was.

But the weather was starting to get warmer and I felt like it was the end of one thing and the beginning of something else. Like I was about to strike out in a new direction and had important decisions to think about. I wished I had a pipe like Travis. I thought it would help me to be contemplative. I could almost smell smoke from his pipe.

I went back with my mind over the past few months here on St. Gaff's. Joining the milkmen, learning the ropes and becoming a real professional. About hearing Corwin's speeches for the first time. About my responsibility to the war effort and interrogating Travis. About Dr. Barrett trying to help me with my spells. And everything I'd seen beneath the sea and under the ground. About the dead birds I'd let loose on the town.

I thought about Mr. Greenwood trying to fix the old radio. I still wished I had one that worked. Meeting Stormy and winning her heart. I thought about lying in her arms and the smell of the blue powder. I replayed my daydreams in my mind, about driving through the hills and imagining having a ranch with Stormy one day, with frilly white things covering the windows. Or maybe being a fisherman like Travis and watching the sunset over the sea with Stormy. Just sitting quietly there. It felt like a future I might actually have.

But still that nagging feeling kept on. I couldn't push out the sound of Mr. Pyman moaning and banging his head against the pole he was tied to. I saw the police tossing his corpse into the harbour. I saw Billings dead on the ground with my personel file and felt the familiar old pangs of guilt. McMyrtle lying in the doctor's house with tubes going down his throat. And then Florsham. I couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible for what happened to him. It was a week ago that I'd found him all torn apart by animals in the woods. I saw Stormy's confused face when I tried to explain why there was blood all over the rug and why we didn't need to bring it back to town anymore.

I'd been trying my hardest to swallow all those bad feelings. Those scenes of death and blood and curdled milk that seemed to follow me everywhere. To push them out so I could just concentrate on the good things and the bright path that I hoped lay ahead. But I hated lying to Stormy. Even if the lies were a matter of national security. I tried to keep reminding myself that I had a duty to the country and to the milkmen.

But it was starting to dawn on me that some of the things the milkmen did, didn't seem quite right. I couldn't understand why they had to do the things there were doing underground. I thought maybe it was time to tell Stormy about the things I'd seen. And despite Dr. Barrett's efforts, I still didn't understand why I kept having those episodes or what they really meant. The doctor told me that probably all these visions were just because of my bad childhood and that once we understood the cause the hallucinations would just fall away, like a knot being untied. But here I was. A good job, a beautiful girlfriend, promotions on the horizon. But still the visions came. And after what I'd seen underground, I couldn't believe what the doctor told me anymore. I'd been doing some real soul searching. Last night I'd made the decision to go talk to Father Wheelan, since he's such a learned man.

It was just around sunset, and I'd had some dinner. I was a little nervous and didn't know quite what I was going to say or if I would tell him everything. But partly I just wanted to get all this weight off my chest. No one was in the church. No one except Oscar, the caretaker. Everyone liked Oscar because he was always smiling and kept to himself. He was sweeping when he saw me.

"Is Father Wheelan here?"

"Oh yes. Doing a private confession in the back office."

I decided to wait and sat on a pew. I looked up at the glowing whale bones arching across the ceiling. A feeling of peace came over me. I'd never just in a church before, but sitting there, I decided I would do it more often. Above the pulpit was one of those paintings they paint right into the wet plaster on the wall. The great whaler in his little boat looking out over the sea. I wondered how one man in such a small boat could catch such huge whales and bring them in to shore. But I guessed that was one of those mysteries you're not supposed to understand.

"He should be out soon," Oscar said.

Then he left, I guess to his cabin behind the church. I was getting bored waiting so I went up to the pulpit and pretended to be a preacher. Waving my arms and pointing at imaginary people in the pews. Warning them of the black ooze they'd be wallowing in if they didn't mend their ways. Then a door closed somewhere behind me and before I could get down, Mrs. Noseworthy wandered into the nave.

"Howie Coxwell. Get down. You have no business being up there."

"Sorry, miss." I scrambled down.

"Hrmph."

And she just walked out the door. Then Father Wheelan came out. When he saw me, he turned all red and his hair was ruffled. He buttoned up the top button on his frock.

“I was just giving Mrs. Noseworthy a confession.”

“Oscar mentioned.”

“What can I do for you, Howie?”

He wiped his mouth really vigorously with the back of his hand.

“I need a confession, too.”

He gave me a strange, sort of nervous look. Then straightened himself.

“Of course. Why don’t you go in and I’ll be there in a moment.”

He pointed to a confessional off to the side. I went into one little room with a screen in it. A minute later, Father Wheelan sat down on the other side. I could hear him unwrapping something, and the smell of shrimp wafted in.

“I hope you don’t mind. I haven’t had my dinner yet. What did you want to confess, my son?”

“Well, father, could I ask a question first? How did the whaler catch those huge whales in just that little boat?”

“It’s better to think of these things as allegories, Howie.”

“Allegories?”

“A lot of the stories in the Great Book are quite old. Older even than our religion. Over time, they were incorporated and amalgamated together into the text we have now.”

“You mean the Great Whaler didn’t write the book?”

“The latest scholarship, at least when I was at the seminary, which was quite a few years ago now, believes that there are several

layers to the text. Some older parts and some newer parts. And that they were brought together over quite a number of years by various...editors.”

“But...doesn’t that mean that the Great Book isn’t true?”

“No, no, Howie....my son...we believe that the text...the editors...were inspired by the Great Whaler...that he guided them until they had the perfect text. A lot of work has gone into piecing together the history of the text...it’s quite interesting, really.”

This was all very confusing to me, so I changed the subject.

“What we talk about here is secret, right? And you can’t tell anyone?”

“Of course, my son.”

“Father, I believe that I’ve been having visions of the underworld...and I think I may have actually gone down there...sometimes it seems like creatures follow me and make me do things...awful things.”

“What sorts of things?”

“Like, sleepwalking.”

“Have you spoken to Dr. Barrett about this? It sounds like you might have a medical condition.”

“So you don’t think it’s possible that I’m really in contact with...something? What if I think I saw the boggeritch?”

“I wouldn’t want to rule anything out. But, we believe the time of miracles has ceased. For us, the stories about these creatures, it’s best to think of them as guides to moral behaviour. In the past, when people weren’t as well educated as they are now, ordinary folks needed to believe in monsters and angels to help them live the right way.”

“What if I know that I’ve gone underground and seen...horrible things. For real?”

“Howie, going underground is extremely dangerous and against the law. And it’s a sin. How did you get underground?”

I started to get nervous that maybe the confessional wasn’t as secret as I thought it was.

“You know, Father...maybe you’re right. Maybe it was just bad dreams and I should go see Dr. Barrett about it.”

“I think that’s very sensible of you, my son. And remember, if you ever need to talk about anything at all, I’m always here to listen.”

Walking back home, I was pretty disappointed. And it occurred to me that something fishy was going on between Father Wheelan and Mrs. Noseworthy. But maybe my imagination was running wild again.

Back on the roof, I looked out over the moored ships and the red stars and thought about the barely known lands on the other side the ocean. I saw a mangy wild dog strolling along the pier. He looked like he had holes in his skin and I couldn’t be sure that I wasn’t imagining things. But something about watching him as he stopped and scratched for fleas made me want more and more to run to Stormy and tell her everything.

Then the blood ran from my face as realized with horror: I’d told Travis I was going to meet him this morning before church. Just at the crack of dawn out at his place. So I couldn’t sleep in after all. It could only have been a bit past midnight, though, and I could sleep a few hours at least. But I felt a lot better after deciding to spill the beans to Stormy. And I could talk to Travis, too. He was always trying to talk to me about these things. Maybe it was time to get his advice, too. Feeling pretty good about my decision, I got up and looked out over the water and said right out loud:

“Thank you my two moons and millions of stars for helping me this night.”

But the hair on the back of my neck pricked up and my vision narrowed when I heard someone snickering behind me. I felt like a big bullseye was suddenly on my back and I was afraid to turn around. But I forced myself. And there was Inspector Mowbray standing there with her long black coat, smoking a pipe.

“What are you doing here? How did you get up here?”

“I followed you up here because I have more questions for you. But then I saw that you were having a moment, so I decided to wait.”

“That’s really weird, inspector. If you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. But anyways, I can’t answer questions now, I have to go to sleep.”

“Nonsense. We’ll go to your room, and you can make me some tea.”

“I’m afraid I can’t make you any tea. I don’t have any. And my stove’s out anyways.”

“I checked your cupboard, Howie. I know you have tea. And I lit the stove before coming up here.”

I didn’t know what to say. But I managed to muster a half-hearted,

“Hey. that’s an invasion of my privacy.”

She just turned around and opened the door to the stairwell.

“Let’s go, Howie. It’s getting cold out here. Or we could go to the station. I know about your little trip up north right after Professor Florsham’s disappearance. I’ve got a pretty good idea what

happened. So let's just go have that chat, shall we?"

I sat on the bed and she sat on the chair. We faced each other, just a few feet apart. I could smell the tobacco on her breath. She had eyes like a hawk and it felt like she noticed and recorded every little twitch or movement in my face.

"I'm going to tell you some things, Mr. Coxwell, and I don't want you to interrupt me. The National Police Bureau have reason to believe that the milkmen, both here on St. Gaff's and throughout the country, are forming into an intelligence gathering organization. It is our belief that their activities are not sanctioned by the central government. It is further our belief that the milkmen are in league with nefarious underworld elements. As yet, we do not have a full picture of their organizational structure or their precise aims. I know that they have been grooming you for a higher position in the organization and I am here to offer you a way out.

"No - do not say anything. We have intelligence that suggests the milkmen make excursions underground, which as you know, is absolutely forbidden. Mr. Coxwell, I know what happened to professor Florsham. I know why you went north. And I know miss Greenwood was with you. Do not speak. Proving what you've done would be exceedingly easy. You'll be sent to the penal island and you will not return. miss Greenwood is clearly an accessory and will meet the same fate. Unless you are willing to report back to us on what goes on inside the milk station.

"It is the NPB's belief at this time that Corwin was sent here to set up the electric thermolizer as a weapon. We do not know the nature of this weapon or who it will be directed against. The milkmen are not who you think they are. You have an opportunity here, Mr. Coxwell. You can do your country a great service and at the same time, you can save yourself and miss Greenwood from a truly terrible fate. We are prepared to offer you protection. We can

set you and miss Greenwood up, if you decide to marry, on a farm in Buckle. You'd like that wouldn't you Mr. Coxwell? No - do not speak. There is no need to respond.

"I realize this is a lot to take in. Reflect on what I've said. The correct path should be obvious. I want your answer in 24 hours. If I do not hear from you, you and miss Greenwood will be arrested. Do not think about trying to flee the island. We've instructed the ferry not to allow you on board. I'll expect to hear from you tomorrow.

"And one last thing before I go. I'd like you to ask yourself, Mr. Coxwell, why the milkmen are so interested in you? Do you really think it's because you're a good worker? What do you think it is they really want from you?"

And with that, she left.

12. The Cabbage

I was stunned by what Inspector Mowbray had said. I didn't think in a million years that I'd have to decide between my duty to my country and doing what the police told me to do. The police were capable of terrible things, I knew. But the milkmen were like a family to me now.

In bed, I tossed and turned, but I'd forgotten to put out the stove and now it was too hot in my room. In the dimness, I stared at the little picture of a ship on my wall and tried to imagine I was off sailing somewhere. But it was no use. Opening the window helped a bit. I stuck my head out and took a deep breath of the cool sea air. It smelt like freedom and calmness. Like the night air was beckoning. Even the black hull in the shipyard seemed warm and comforting somehow. This room, the shipyard, the picture on the wall. It's like all of the town belonged to me, and none of it felt so dear as now, when the prospect of being shipped off to some horrible island loomed in front of me.

Birds were starting to chirp outside, and I thought maybe I had fallen asleep for a while without noticing. I figured I'd just start out early to see Travis. Downstairs, I walked out the front door of the building and my eyes locked with the dead gaze of Beaver. He was sitting in a milk truck on the other side of the street. He was just sitting there, staring at me. He made me nervous, but I had nothing to hide, yet. So I crossed the street to say hello and ask what he was

doing here. But a couple steps off the sidewalk, he started the truck and drove off. He didn't say a word, but even driving off, he kept his baleful eyes on me.

Maybe he'd seen Inspector Mowbray? There was nothing I could do now, so I began the long walk out of town towards the fisherman's cottage. The town was quiet. The baker hadn't started his rounds yet and the damp air clung to me. Looking up at the neat and tidy houses, I thought about all the care that went into the little lawns, painting the boards to keep the sea salt out, little knick knacks placed just so on the porches. And I wondered if I would ever have a house like this of my own. There was no reason to think it was impossible, but somehow it seemed like the fates weren't going to leave me to a settled existence keeping up a home of my own. But...you never know.

On the gravel road out to the cottage, the dawn was just appearing. I knew I didn't want to leave this island. I had real friends here. But how could I avoid the police? All sorts of scenarios played out in my head. I thought about taking Travis' boat and rowing it to the mainland. I could bring Stormy with me and we could start a new life in Mingsbight? I could be a double agent and tell the police I was working with them, but actually I'd keep working for the milkmen and only tell the police things that didn't matter. But Mowbray seemed to know much more than I did already. The idea of betraying the milkmen made me feel sick. But looking out over the water, I could just see myself with my own place in Buckle. Taking a morning stroll in the morning, tending to the garden with Stormy. I could meet new friends there. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. But I feared Corwin. How far would he go to track me down?

Later, Travis and I were out on his boat. I looked out over the sea and the coast. I'd never really gotten to look at St. Gaff's from the water. Part of it looked like big slabs of black stone sliding into

the water. There were broken cliffs, like some God or great beast was clawing at the shore to keep from being pulled down. It was still really early in the morning and the sky was blood red. It was one of those mornings when the red moon kept shining in the sky even though the sun was up over the horizon and peeking through the clouds. I nodded off a bit and Travis grabbed my shoulder.

“You okay there, Howie?”

“Sure. I just didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Not gonna throw your line in?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Here...just pull it back. Put your finger on this lever and cast, like this.”

“And then what happens?”

“Now just wait and see if you get a bite. Pull it in bit by bit to make the bait look alive.”

Travis cast his line too. And there we sat in the quiet morning waiting for fish. It was a profound moment between two men on a fishing skiff. But I was distraught by what Inspector Mowbray had said.

“Travis?”

“Yes, Howie.”

“How comes everyone in town treats you like you’re so different?”

He raised his eyebrows just a bit when I said this. But he didn’t take his eyes off his line.

“Oh, just because of my beliefs.”

“But you believe what everyone else does, don’t you? Nearly everyone in town goes to church on Sundays.”

“They do...but...going to church isn’t the same as...well...in church, it’s all good news. Forgiveness...like someone’s watching out for you and everything’s going to be okay. And I’m not sure how much the townsfolk really believe even that much.”

He was quiet for a minute.

“They also don’t believe that I’m a Seeker.”

And he looked at me.

“Do you think you could take this boat all the way to the mainland? Just curious.”

“No reason why not. If you didn’t get lost. Might take you a day and night with a good wind.”

He turned back to his line.

“Howie, we’ve spoken a couple of times. Did you ever think that you might be a Seeker?”

“Me? No. I have my spells. But I never felt like catching a whale or anything. Do you think I might be one?”

“I do.”

“And what does it mean? I can catch the whales?”

“Maybe one day.”

Something occurred to me.

“If I’m a Seeker, could I...use it like a weapon?”

He turned and gave me a sharp look.

“No, Howie, you can’t ever hurt anyone. Have you —”

“No! Of course not. I meant, by accident. Without knowing what I was doing.”

He looked perplexed at this, and didn't say anything right away, so I changed the subject.

“Is Naomi a Seeker, too?”

His face hardened and he pulled in his line.

“We'd better be getting back.”

We didn't catch any fish. And we got back too late to make it to church.

It was a long walk home. The streets were still empty when I got to town. Most people were probably listening to Father Wheelan droning on about the war and doing our bit. I walked past the church. There was a statue out front of some saint or other, and I noticed that the foundation was cracked. And I was sure it wasn't cracked before. But I went back to my room and passed out.

When I woke up, the sun was shining in. I felt pretty good for while, lying there, before I remembered that I had to tell Mowbray something by tonight. I didn't have any food and I was hungry. For a while, I just laid there, thinking about being hungry and about Mowbray and Corwin. Then I remembered my resolution to tell Stormy everything. That made me feel better again. I would tell her and we would decide together, as a couple. She'd know what to do. I hopped up and walked as fast as I could to see Stormy. When I got there, Stormy and Mr. Greenwood were just finishing up lunch.

“Would you like a sandwich, Howie?”

“Yes, please Mr. Greenwood.”

He disappeared inside. Such a nice man. Then Stormy picked something up off the table and showed me.

“It’s here! The new issue.”

I was a bit nervous to tell Stormy everything, so I thought that if we just relaxed a bit and read some Eliza Pike, I might feel more at ease. And Mr. Greenwood was back with some food.

“I’ll leave you two to your magazine,” he said with a wink, then went back into the house.

I pulled my chair up beside Stormy’s and ate while she read aloud.

In the story, Eliza caught a scoundrel who’d abducted a child. She interrogated him under a harsh electric light until he broke down and told the truth: and the truth was something truly shocking. The scoundrel said that there was a ring of policemen in charge of abducting children. It was the bad police officers who put him up to it. So Eliza worked her contacts in the police department, going out for a glass of whiskey with one and asking him subtle questions about his colleagues. Late nights surveilling the suspects. She was shocked to find out that it was true: the police were up to no good. She took pictures and gathered evidence and then made her move. She met with the police chief in his office and told him everything she knew. She showed him pictures and the chief was stunned. The chief promised that he would open an investigation and weed out the bad apples. The town was a safer place, now and the children were safe. Walking out of the office, Eliza thought to herself, ‘This is what it means to have an unflinching commitment to truth and justice. You must always do the right thing, tell the truth. Don’t blindly trust the appearance of things because sometimes those we trust can be up to no good. But the important thing is that we don’t take matters into our own hands but trust the authorities to do the right thing.’

As Stormy put the book down, Eliza’s words echoed through my brain: Always trust the police and never lie. I took a deep breath and began.

“Stormy, I want to tell you something and it’s going to be pretty surprising, but I feel that I have to do the right thing. Last night, a police officer came to see me. She said that she knew about some things I did wrong and that I was going to be arrested if I didn’t do what she asked.”

“What? What things that you did wrong?”

“No, let me finish.”

“But what things?”

“Well...she says that when we went up north, to your aunt’s...she knows that really I took the truck without permission.”

“That’s it? But you had permission to take the truck right? And you brought it back anyways.”

I hesitated a moment, staring right at the old army radio that I’d left under a bench weeks ago, still wishing that I could listen to Eliza on the radio.

“No, Stormy, that’s not all. She also thinks I had something to do with...whoever killed Billings. And she thinks I know something about where professor Florsham disappeared to.”

“But you didn’t have anything to do with any of that stuff.”

“No.”

“So what difference does it make? What does she want you to do?”

“She wants me to inform on the milkmen.”

“Inform her about what?”

“I don’t know. She thinks they’re up to no good. Something about them going underground.”

“Are they?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But maybe.”

“Howie, this doesn’t make any sense. You didn’t do anything wrong and the milkmen are just delivering milk. She’s just trying to scare you for some reason.”

“But it sounded really serious. She said she’d protect me as a witness. That I’d get a farm on Buckle and that in exchange for me reporting on the milkmen I could live on a farm out there with you.”

“With me? What does this have to do with me?”

“She says she knows that you were with me when I went up north and that that made you an accessory to the crime.”

“I’m not an accessory to anything! We did nothing wrong at all. I would just ignore her. And live on a farm in County Buckle? Yuck.”

“Maybe we could raise rabbits?”

“Ha, right. No way I’m going near a farm.”

I was a bit surprised that she wouldn’t want to live on a farm with me, but right now I had to decide what to do about Mowbray.

“So you think I should just not tell Mowbray anything? Should I tell Corwin?”

“Yes! Tell Corwin. Maybe he’ll know why the police would want you to report on the milkmen. The whole thing is ridiculous.”

So we made up our mind. I would tell Corwin everything.

Later, walking home, I realized that I’d been a bit vague about some of the things Mowbray had said. I hadn’t mentioned that, according to Mowbray, the milkmen had an interest in me because of the special things I could do. But maybe telling her absolutely

everything would be too much in one sitting. I decided that the next time we talked, I would tell her about my spells, so that she would start to understand me a bit better.

I was walking to the milk station to see if I could talk to Corwin. I took the long way to the station, trying to convince myself that I was just maybe going to do some food shopping on the way, but really, I was just wasting time because I was nervous about talking to Corwin. I didn't know exactly what I'd say. I went past a grocer's shop and hear a familiar tapping sound. And then a familiar voice. My neighbour was in there with her stick and she didn't sound too happy. She was arguing with the shop keeper about something. I went it.

"Everything okay?"

"I told her before not to come in here. She smells. It bothers the customers. You smell!"

The neighbour mumbled something like, 'I don't smell - you smell.' I knew I had to intervene.

"She's my neighbour, I'll take her home."

"Thank you."

She objected a bit, but I steered her out onto the sidewalk and towards home. I looked back and noticed the fat cop talking to the shop keeper on the sidewalk. They were watching us. We walked a bit and then she poked me in the side. Then looked at me with a mischievous grin. She opened her coat and I covered my nose at the stench. But she showed me what she had.

"Oh God. Did you steal that?"

"My cabbage."

She'd stolen the cabbage and now I was helping her get away. I

looked back and the fat cop was following a block behind. I hurried my neighbour along as the full implications of the situation dawned on me. I was now an accessory to shoplifting and the police had me dead to rights. I knew what this meant. I'd be arrested. The deal would be off. After a high profile arrest out in the street, I'd have no value to Mowbray as a secret witness. Corwin would know I'd flipped. I couldn't do anything about it now. We got home and up the stairs. She showed me again before going inside.

“Cabbage?”

“Maybe later, thanks.”

I was starting to panic. I looked out the window and sure enough the fat cop was there looking up at me. I ran down the stairs and out the back door where the garbage was. I walked up the pier and past the post where Pyman had been tied. I didn't want to end up like that and I thought my only chance was to run to the police station and tell Mowbray everything.

I was full of sorrow and regret at all the bad choices I'd made. I should have been a shipbuilder, hanging from the ropes and punching rivets all day like Travis. No one would have bothered me and I would have bothered no one. But I just had to get involved in the world of intrigue and national security. My love of country and sense of duty had come back to bite me. On the plus side, I was sure that Stormy would eventually see how nice life on a farm could be. And at least we'd have each other, and we'd have a great story to tell. That thought was interrupted when I caught my foot on a crack in the sidewalk. I went down fast and whacked my head hard on the concrete. Everything went dark.

I felt I was falling and falling...Stormy was there...waking me up with smiles and sunshine and rainbows all around her. And we hopped off with the bunnies across the field. Until we all got scared

by the sound of a giant sucking monster. It was coming after us...turning the sky dark.

And then I woke up and it was pitch black. But the noise was still there...sucking...breathing...I couldn't tell. I was under sheets and my head hurt a lot. My eyes got used to the dark a bit and I saw that I was on a kind of table...and beside me was someone else covered in sheets, on his back with tubes coming out of his mouth.

“HELP!” I cried out, “HELP!”

I heard some shuffling. And then in walked Dr. Barrett. He was holding a lamp and I figured out where I was. And that it was McMyrtle on the other table, snoring away in his coma.

“Howie. It's okay. Don't get worked up. Someone found you passed out on the street and we brought you here. You should be fine. Just a bad bump on the head.”

And he yawned.

“Thank you, doctor. I don't know what happened.”

“Looks like you tripped on a broken piece of sidewalk. It was strange. The concrete was split right through.”

I was really sleepy still, so I laid my head back on the pillow.

“You just rest, Howie. You'll be fine.”

And he walked back out of the room. The pillow was soft and probably filled with feathers, like floating on a cloud. And then I remembered -

“Doctor! Doctor!”

He rushed back in.

“Yes?”

“What time is it?”

“Time? It must be three or four in the morning. Just relax, Howie. Get some sleep.”

My face went numb when I realized the deadline had passed and inspector Mowbray would be out there looking for me. There was only one thing I could do now. I struggled to get up. I had no boots on. I couldn’t find them.

“Howie, just lie down. You’re fine.”

But I kept looking, getting more and more scared.

“Who knows I’m here?”

“No one. Me, the gentleman who found you and came to get me. And I suppose anyone who walked by while you were unconscious and saw us take you here.”

So half the town probably knew I was in here. I just ran out the doctor’s front door without bothering about my boots. The concrete felt strange under my bare feet as I ran. And there was a strange flowy sensation. I didn’t have my clothes on. Just my underwear and a cloth medical gown that was wafting out behind me as I ran. I felt like I was moving in slow motion across the town. There goes the grocer. There goes the barber shop. But my legs couldn’t get me off the street fast enough. I looked all over for signs of policemen hiding in the shadows, waiting to pounce on me, but I couldn’t find them. The white moon was like a spotlight pointing its moonbeam fingers right at me and there was nowhere to hide.

I passed by Billy on the wall, and I thought his eyebrows were turned into an evil black V, making his grin sinister and mocking. He threatened with his milk bottle. Which looked yellow and clumpy in the moonlight. I didn’t say a word. I pounded on the door to Corwin’s office. I didn’t even care if I woke him up. I had to see

him. I heard from inside,

“Come in”

So I pushed the door open. It stank in his office, which was very weird, but I didn’t really register that right away. He was sitting at his desk in full uniform when I ran in.

“Mr. Corwin, it’s the police. That new inspector, she says she’ll arrest me if I don’t tell everything I’ve seen here. And I was coming to see you but I hit my head.”

And I pointed to my head at this point for emphasis.

“But you have to protect me. We have to figure out how to save me. I didn’t tell her anything. Anything at all. I — “

Corwin was smiling strangely. I couldn’t figure it out. I was shaking and sweating.

“I’m glad you came to me with this, Howie.”

“As am I. Congratulations, Mr. Coxwell”

I turned. I hadn’t seen, but sitting in a chair off in the corner behind me was Inspector Mowbray.

She stood up and extended her hand to me. But she was wearing a suit instead of a police uniform.

The last thing I saw before passing out again was a badge on her jacket: D.O.L.A.

13. The Red Badge of Courage

“Yesterday morning at 4:41AM, in my office, as witnessed by Deputy Assistant Mowbray of the Department of Lactic Affairs, I signed an order for our very own Howie Coxwell, who, on this day will be promoted to the glorious rank of Red Badge.

“After months of diligent work, an impeccable sense of punctuality, and intense study, Howie has achieved what only a select few milkmen can even dream of. His name will reverberate through the halls of every milk receiving station in the land and across the rivers of time. The gratitude towards Howie for his undaunting service flows like the richest cream from the deepest, darkest depths of every milkman on the island of St. Gaff’s and across this nation of Tow Law.

“It goes without saying that I cannot here, at this time, spell out Howie’s other achievements in rooting out subversion and furthering the less visible elements of our mission as milkmen. Without the efforts and exertions of our very own Howie Coxwell, suffice it to say, the inhabitants of this island would be able to sleep easier.

“At the same time, let us never forget that the forces aligned against us have not been subdued. Let us remember what we are fighting for. This war is about more than securing iron and base metals. It is about securing the higher goods, those things which make life worth living for ourselves and our progeny. Always remember the importance of

our product to the war effort. When you see a young tot, smiling and happy with his milk and cookies, know that it is our milk that makes his bones strong, his body, tall and powerful. As the years of conflict stretch on from one generation to the next, let us never forget that milk is the grease that oils the machine of war.

“And let us all now congratulate a man who has proven himself to be an invaluable asset in our struggle: Howie Coxwell.”

After this a big cheer went up from the milkmen and I went to get my badge. I looked out over the crowd. All my friends and colleagues were there. Frank, Beaver, Walker, Ryan. There were donuts and coffee for after and I noticed Ryan shoveling a bunch of donuts into his bag. And then he left. Anyways, when I got to Mr. Corwin, he stuck out his hand for me to shake. So I shook it.

“Congratulations, Howie. Very well deserved. I know you’ll make us proud. Frank has some instructions for you and we’ll speak again later tonight. I have work to do, but enjoy the celebration with the others.”

Corwin turned and left. I turned to look out over the room and I guess everyone was pretty busy, because the only ones left were Walker, who poured some sugar in his coffee and left, and Frank, who greeted me with a big smile. It was only then that I realized that Corwin hadn’t actually given me a red badge. Maybe Frank had it.

“Hey there, Howie. Great job on the promotion. I hate to do this to you, but we’re gonna need you to spray for flies today. Ryan’s been doing it since McMyrtle’s accident. But he’s got a doctor’s appointment or something and had to take the afternoon off. You don’t mind, right?”

“No, no, not at all. But Frank, I think Corwin forgot to give me my badge.”

Frank put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a grave look.

“Yeah, listen, Howie. We don’t have any actual red badges right now, but we ordered one. Things are kind of backed up at HQ. But you’ll definitely be getting one before too long. And since I know you’re gonna ask, there is supposed to be a pay bump with the promotion, but right now, with the war and us being shorthanded, we’ll have to wait a bit on the raise.”

“Really? I was thinking I could move out of my place...I have a girl and –”

“That’s great, Howie. I’m happy that you understand. You know, that’s what I like about you. It’s not all about the money and prestige. It’s about the team. And the mission...So you get to spraying and then get some rest. Corwin’s gonna want to see you tonight. Come by his office around 11. And congratulations, again.”

With that, he slapped me on the back and left me there. To tell you the truth, I didn’t want to spray for flies at all. I thought that getting promoted meant that I’d have newer and better duties. But I guess it made sense since Ryan couldn’t spray and no one else knows how like I do. So I went back to the room with the thermolizer and all the other machines and pipes. I was feeling a bit down. But that’s probably normal. After a big high like that, you’re bound to be a bit down after.

The other problem was that I really didn’t want to risk breathing in the fly juice again. The last time it was bad, and since I was pretty excited about everything that was happening in my life, I decided to do things a bit differently. I went to the bathroom supply closet and got a bottle of the soap we’re supposed to use to wash our hands. I poured some into the sprayer machine and mixed it with warm water. It was probably better to use soap sometimes instead anyways. I decided that with my newfound authority, I would suggest using soap for the job every once in a while. That’s the kind of thinking you can only get with down on the ground, hands on experience like I had. I was just

imagining myself at a big meeting with a bunch of stuffed shirts from D.O.L.A. who'd probably never delivered a bottle of milk, and me there in my uniform, laying it out for them. I waved the sprayer around as if I were wagging my finger in their faces and said, right out loud.

"You want to improve the efficiency of what we do? You've got to listen to us boys on the ground. Out there on the street, it's not about graph charts and smoking cigars. You never know when some old guy will complain about you to the boss or some lady won't pay her bill and you have to resort to drastic measures to get her to pay. Have any of you ever been stuck on the road outside of town when your engine broke down? With the sun beating down and all the milk about to go bad? Have you? Well I have and I know the kind of quick thinking that's needed to save the day."

"Bravo, Howie."

I snapped out of it when I turned around and inspector Mowbray was standing there.

"I see you're getting into the swing of things with your new rank. I just wanted to pop in before taking the ferry back to Mingsbight."

She put her hand out and I shook it. I forgot that I still had soap on my hands and the inspector looked at her hand and sniffed it in disgust. But then she just shook it off.

"I hope there are no hard feeling, Howie. We had to be sure of your loyalty. And you passed the test with bright colours. As I'm sure you're beginning to understand, the milkman's role is only secondarily about delivering milk. Our primary objective has always been surveillance of the interior and intelligence gathering. It is only recently that we've also gotten involved in research and development. And by a fortuitous stroke, our first project happened to be here on St. Gaff's, and it turned out that you might be just the fellow to help us out. You signed up just in time!"

“I do have a bit of a knack for interrogations.”

“Right...well, all the best, Howie. I look forward to hearing about your progress.”

With that, she left me to my spraying.

Now, I'm not a natural scientist, But I really thought putting all that soap in the sprayer was a good idea. It definitely smelled better than the bug spray, but I wasn't prepared for how many bubbles there would be. I thought the first big bunch were just because of some soapy foam at the top of the hopper, so I kept spraying. But more and more bubbles kept coming. They were everywhere. I turned the pressure up all the way, thinking a strong jet of liquid would pop the bubbles, but that didn't work either. So I turned the machine off and stood back to look at what I'd done. I felt my face go red when I saw that the thermolizer was now covered in soapy water and it was making a strange sound. My first day with a red badge and I'd destroyed the most important machine in the station, I thought.

Then there was a banging on the door. Now, the door was locked, and it had one of those small round windows. Beaver's fat ugly face was there, peering in. I ran over and put my face right up to the window to block the view.

“What the blazes is going on in there? What's that sound?”

“Nothing. Just a regular part of the cleaning. I developed a new procedure to clean the machines better now that I have a red badge.”

“Let me in.”

“I have to let everything soak for a few minutes. No one can come in.”

“You better not' a broken anything. Corwin'll have your guts for garters.”

And with that he walked back to his desk at the front of the station. I quickly dumped out the soapy water and filled the sprayer with regular warm water. I sprayed the water everywhere, but it took a long time to get all the bubbles popped and all that soapy water down the drain. The thermolizer was still sounding weird, but I figured it would probably work itself out once it was dry. There was just a big mound of bubbles over the drain. I keep spraying it until it all went down. And then, to my horror, I heard a scary, low sound...rumbling...like something deep down under the station had cracked. I listened for another minute, and the rumbling subsided. I looked around and you couldn't see any evidence of the soap anymore.

'All's well that ends in love and war' I thought, and I left the station for the day.

After that, I went to see Stormy at the druggist's. It was a special occasion, so I decided to buy her some flowers. When she saw me come in with the flowers, she put her hands to her mouth and gasped.

"Oh my God, Howie! I was so worried! What happened?"

"Well, I went to see you-know-who about you-know-what, like we'd discussed. And - I got promoted!"

"Yay!"

"Congratulations, Howie!" said Molly, who was sitting with Stormy as usual.

"But where's the red badge?"

"It's on its way. They have to send it from the mainland. They don't just leave those badges lying around, you know."

"So did you get a big raise? Can you move out of that awful room now?"

“Well...the paperwork’s in the mail. But with the war and them not having enough people working at the moment, we have to tighten our belts. For the cause.”

“So they’re not going to pay you more?”

“For me, it’s not about the money. It’s really about going on missions and playing for the team.”

“Okay,” Stormy said...but she seemed a bit deflated.

She probably didn’t realize the flowers were for her.

“But here, these are for you!”

I handed Stormy the flowers and leaned in to hug her. She wrinkled her nose and so did Molly.

“You smell funny, Howie,” Molly said.

“Not in a bad way,” Stormy said, “Just...”

“It’s soap. I had to spray for flies. I developed a new, more efficient method that I had to test out.”

And then, on the other side of the store, buying a bunch of liquorice strings, was Ryan. Who was supposed to be sick at Dr. Barrett’s. He walked right by us after paying.

“Hey, Ryan. Aren’t you supposed to be sick?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So you lied to get out of spraying for flies?”

“I’m so tired of that crap. I needed an afternoon off.”

“So you lied to Frank? I had to spray because of you.”

“Better you than me!”

“You watch how you speak to your superior. I’m red badge now, remember.”

“Right. Sorry about that. See ya later.”

And he left. Then Stormy and Molly stood up too.

“We’ve got to get going,” Stormy said.

“I’m not done my soda!”

“Maybe we’ll see you tomorrow...okay? We have to study...for a test.”

And off they went. But that was okay. Sometimes I like to just sit at the bar and think about everything. Overall, it was a good day and one I’d never forget.

On my way home, I picked up some fish chowder for dinner and then dozed on my bed until it was time to go see Corwin. I figured he wanted to give me some fatherly advice about my new role at the milk station. I thought maybe I’d bring up Ryan’s insubordinate attitude. And even Beaver. We were equals in rank now, but he was still treating me like an inferior. Demanding to be let in to the back room when I was spraying. That wasn’t right.

I made a whole list of all the grievances in my head. But it turned out that that wasn’t what Corwin wanted to talk about.

“Have a seat, Howie. Congratulations again on the promotion. We’ll have the badge for you as soon as we can. I believe Deputy Assistant Mowbray briefed you on the nature of our mission here?”

I nodded, but really, I didn’t remember exactly what she’d told me.

“I asked you to come here so that I could fill you in on the last piece of the puzzle. The thermolizer is not working at its full capacity yet. The department decided to use this island for the project because of its isolation. Being on a fairly remote island, and

also because we believed it would be possible, for various reasons I can't go into right now, to find the elements we need for the machine. We were very fortunate that you signed up to be a milkman, Howie. You've done an impressive job. But I have a new task for you and I have to insist that you do not speak to anyone at all about this."

"Mum's the word," I said, "you can trust me."

He paused a moment before going on. Then, from behind his desk, he produced a tin milking pail and a pair of heavy rubber gloves.

"You recall, Howie, that a group of us went...underground a few weeks ago. And you recall that we encountered...an entity down there. The entity is called Mamifa. Again, in the interest of brevity, I won't go into too many details. But suffice it to say, the creature, Mamifa, produces a substance called phlogisterion. This is the substance we need to complete our tests of the thermolizer.

"I had a suspicion that you might be particularly well-placed to gather this substance for us. That is why I brought you with us that night. And as it turned out, my hunch was correct. You saw how the creature reacted to you."

I started trembling when I realized what was coming.

"Howie. I need you to go underground, find Mamifa and milk her."

I said nothing.

"Did you hear me, Howie?"

"Yes."

"Do you think you're up to it?"

"You want me to go alone?"

"That's right. I think you're less likely to spook her if you're

alone.”

“When did you want me to go?”

“Right now.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Is that going to be a problem?”

“I...now?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, Howie. It’s risky, I know. But we have to try. For the cause. Come on, Howie, get up. Take the pail. If you run into any trouble at all, just take the stairs back. Take a deep breath. Look at me. Take a deep breath. I’ll be waiting right here.

“Down you go. Go on. Remember - we’re all in this together.”

I walked down the stairs with my candle and my milking pail. Trembling. It was a cold misty morning, and I could smell fires burning across the field. There was still some snow on the ground. I came to a large stone barn made of reddish stone. It didn’t look like anyone had been here for ages, and the barn was crumbling in places. The doors were long gone but I couldn’t see inside. I heard animals moving around. I was still pretty scared. But I thought that maybe the good lord above had brought me to this place for a reason. That Mamifa was inside and would bestow her milk upon me as a blessing for all the hard times I’d gone through. I would be the anointed one who saved the nation of Tow Law by bringing the phlogisterion and ending the war.

I crept into the barn, holding my candle high. There were cows on the dirt floor, mostly asleep in the dimness of the barn. But one cow, much bigger than the others, light brown, lay dozing with her head on her forelegs. She had horns, but I knew it was her. Some people cut the horns off nowadays, but no one used to. I knew the

final stage of my journey was here and all I had to do was wake Mamifa and milk her. I kneeled down and brought the candle close to her face. And I whispered gently,

“Good morning Mamifa...it’s time to wake from your slumbers and let me milk you.”

But she didn’t move. She must have been so deeply asleep. I reached out, and tickled her ear a bit. Her eyes shot open. My eyes got wide with terror and the cow’s eyes got wide with terror. The giant soft nose right in my face. She hopped to her feet like a bolt of lightning and before I could do anything, she charged. She seemed to bound right over me and her head smashed into the wall. Bits of stone fell down all around. I got to my feet and ran. And she ran after me. Outside the barn, I slipped on an old man who was sleeping in the street, wrapped in a filthy brown coat. It was night and the streets were wet with recent rain.

“Sorry!”

He got up and dusted himself off.

“That’s okay...what time is it?”

“I don’t know. I just got here.”

He stretched out his arms and gave a tremendous yawn. And with the breath he drew in, he seemed to change. He wasn’t such an old man after all. His face was mostly a thin devious smile and his eyes darted this way and that. His coat now was shining red and black. He straightened up like a plant that hadn’t been watered for a long time. He was taller than me and thin. He looked up at the moon, yolk-like in the mist and sooty fog.

“It’s just about time for my performance. Come with me, young man. What’s your name?”

“I’m Howie. I’m a milkman.”

“The milkman? Of course. But come along or we’ll be late.”

We walked through the streets of some city I’d never seen. But there were no gas lamps. No lights in any windows. Nothing moved except us. We went down an alley and he cleared some boxes and rubbish away, and there was a door, only about three feet high.

“This place is so old, it’s sunken into the ground. But come on. They’re waiting for me.”

He opened the door and a stench of old tobacco smoke and sweat poured out. He bent over and went in. I just stood there until he stuck his face back out of the doorway.

“This is the way, Howie. There’s no other way forward. If you want to get where you want to go, you’ll have to stoop.”

I didn’t really want to, but I stooped and went in. It was a dim lounge. There were figures wrapped up in old coats sitting in booths with dusty and faded red upholstery. I couldn’t see anyone’s face. There was thick choking smoke hanging in the air, if you could even call it air. My new friend hopped up on the stage with a flourish.

“And now my friends...prepare to be...amazed.”

A spotlight from somewhere lit him up. He held out his hand, with his palm facing towards him. He brought his other hand over and, to my astonishment, he seemed to pull his thumb right off his hand! A bit of a murmur went up from the crowd. Then he put his thumb back on. As he came down off the stage, the figures all crowded around, congratulating him. The magician smiled and tried to pretend it was no big deal.

He managed to pull himself away from the crowd and linked his arm with mine. And we walked back behind the stage and out a special door that was only for performers. And we were out in the city streets again. There was still nothing moving. But I could see,

looming over the city buildings. Giant columns that stretched up so high I couldn't see the tops.

"Where are we? Who are you?"

"I am your guide this night, Howie," the magician said.

Then he stopped and motioned for me to stop. Something was moving in the shadows. It was a familiar sound. Then the Doberman I used to know came into view and was about to lunge. Its head was still a bit mangled. But the magician held up his hand and the beast stopped and went back to wherever it came from.

"Don't worry. You're safe with me."

"Where are we going?"

"I want to show you something. Over here. Are you cold, Howie? You should have brought a warm coat like mine!"

He was right. I was shivering. And I could see that we were walking towards one of the columns.

"The people came here thousands of years ago, fleeing the beasts that roamed the earth in mankind's infancy. They learned magic. Way of keeping themselves hidden from the beasts. Here they made a life for themselves. And these pillars were formed year by year, generation after generation, The pedestals laid by a baby's first smile for her mother. Each brick is made from the bonds of family, friends, where are your family and friends, Howie? Hmmm? No matter. No one remembers the columns anymore."

And he looked up wistfully.

"But they're right there? How can anyone forget them?"

"You people don't believe in magic anymore. Up there with your machines and your medicine. You can't see what's right. Up. Against your face. Do you want to see another trick, Howie?"

“No...I came here for —“

Then he sounded angry.

“You came here for what? What exactly do you think you’re doing down here, Howie? You can’t just come and go as you please. You really think you can just come down here and take whatever you want? You’re a selfish, selfish person, you know that? Do you know what your selfishness has cost the world?”

At this point, we’d stopped at the base of a column. It must have been as wide as three or four big houses. All bricks of different sizes. Then he nearly shouted,

“Look, Howie.”

And he showed me how there were huge cracks in the column. Soapy bubbles oozed from one of them. And then I noticed for the first time that a crowd of shadowy people in heavy coats were gathering around, listening to the magician and watching me. And I was nervous.

“These are good people, Howie. Do you see what you’ve done?”

And he pointed at the cracks.

“This is your fault. Your fault. You did it.”

His voice shook my bones, and I was getting really choked up. I knew he was right. It was all my fault.

“Milkman? I know what you really are.”

And for a split second, his face was like Florsham’s face.

“Did you think I would forget what you did to me? “

“I didn’t mean to...”

Then the magician was smiling. Mean.

“You did mean to, Howie.”

From his coat he pulled a jagged pen knife.

“And I mean to do this.”

He thrust the pen right into my chest. I howled in pain. I crawled out of the hole in the parking lot. For a second, I hoped that it wasn't true. But I saw blood dripping. A lot of blood. I couldn't stand up. I dragged myself along. My head getting lighter. I tried to get to Corwin's office.

I looked up and gasped. In the red light of the moon. It was Billy on the Wall. But the wall was cracked, and Billy's smile was cleaved in half. Horrible and disfigured. And I really thought I heard him snickering at me.

14. Greenwood

Once upon a time, and a really awful time it was, I saw a red cow scrambling out of a hole in the ground. And the cow came up to me and said,

Milk me oh milk me my sweet little boy

And I will give you a most wondrous toy

Up and down the hedgerow we go

Take a wrong step and down you will go

I had a sensation of being lifted and carried on a litter like a great king through the streets of St. Gaff's. A man's face looked down smiling at me, saying I was going to be okay. And then, a poke in the arm, and off into the deep dark blackness I went. I heard myself mumbling something I couldn't understand. I was floating through clouds of yellow sulphur and perfume. My mouth was dry and I couldn't swallow...

I heard the sound of tearing. Paper tearing. Then it dawned on me that my eyes were open and unfocused. Surrounded by some pale, sickly yellow fog. I squinted to focus better and there, in front of my face, was a bizarre pattern like plants curling this way and that. Little dots and flowers, the colour of bile, serpentineing all up and down. It was a wall and it was two or three inches from my nose...trying to focus made my stomach churn.

I pulled back and took in my surroundings. I was in a big fluffy bed. The pillow too soft. I was having a hard time breathing. My chest hurt. The room was filled with sun. The walls were covered with garish wallpaper. And that's when I realized that I'd been tearing bits of the wallpaper off.

I pushed one of the pillows up against the ripped part so no one would see.

I tried to look out the window but to my eyes it was just a blur of light surrounded by thick flowery fuchsia curtains. There was a bedside table with a small mechanical horse toy. Also a syringe and a brown glass bottle. There was a white dresser with flowers in an ornate vase on it. I tried to speak but just croaked like a dried out old frog. I pushed myself as best I could to roll over. I looked down at the thick rug. The floral print made me dizzy, and I rolled back onto my back and drifted off to sleep again.

Something moved on the bed and my eyes opened again. It was evening. The colours in the room were less intense. Out the window were leafy trees in the red evening light. And there was Mr. Greenwood smiling down at me with a cup of water in his hand. I struggled to sit up a bit and he put the glass to my lips.

"That's good, Howie. You must be very thirsty."

I wanted to drink the whole glass, but after a few sips I couldn't drink anymore.

"Why am I here?"

"Dr. Barrett told us what to do. He said that you needed bed rest, good food, and an occasional dose of laudanum. All things we could do here. Stormy wanted to bring you back so we could take care of you."

"Where is she?"

“Oh, she’s just out with some friends at the moment. I’m sure she’ll be along before long. But I’m very glad to see you revived somewhat. You’ve been in and out of consciousness for a couple of days now.”

“What happened?”

“That’s what I’ve been meaning to ask you. Someone found you early in the morning, bleeding from a cut in your chest, and unconscious. Dr. Barrett patched you up. You don’t remember anything?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but I wretched a bit like I was going to throw up and more or less collapsed back onto the bed.

“That’s okay, Howie, you just rest.”

He felt my forehead, smiled and left me there dozing. The light got dimmer and dimmer as the sun sank lower. I tried to keep my eyes away from the wallpaper. The leaves out the window got deeper and deeper red before turning gray in the dusk.

Then it was morning and I was thirsty and hungry.

“Hello?” I called out.

Moments later, Stormy came in. For me it was like a scene in slow motion. The door opened and the whole room was filled with her big smile and all that flowing dark hair. My nostrils filled with wonderful perfume smells.

“Oh, Howie!”

Then her arms were around me and I was happy.

“How are you feeling?”

”Thirsty and hungry.”

“No wonder. Dr. Barrett said you were malnourished and

exhausted. He said that would make your recovery longer. I was so worried about you!”

And she hugged me tighter, until I coughed.

“Oh, sorry.”

Mr. Greenwood came in with a tray. There was tea, orange juice and some sweet buns with jam. I teared up a bit. I’d never seen a breakfast like that and my heart flowed over with gratitude. I sat up a bit and wiped my eyes.

“This is so nice of you. Is this your room?”

“I’m sleeping in the guest room. I wanted you to be here in my room since it’s more cheerful.”

I munched away at this royal breakfast and Stormy and her father pulled up chairs. Mr. Greenwood took out a beautiful old pipe and lit it. We spoke and laughed, and it was almost worth getting stabbed just to spend the morning like this. Stormy helped to pull up my shirt and I saw the stitches where I’d been cut. Then Mr. Greenwood asked,

“So, Howie, do you remember what happened?”

My head was still swimming, and I accidentally blurted out something I maybe shouldn’t have.

“A bit. Mr. Corwin wanted me to go underground. He said I had to milk an underground cow and that only I could do it. But then there was this magician and he showed me how I’d broken the pillars under the earth and then he stabbed me with a pen knife. And then I was at the milk station.”

They looked at each other.

“Maybe you gave him too much of the painkiller?” Stormy asked her father.

“He hasn’t had any this morning!”

“It’s not the painkiller. It’s true.”

The last thing I wanted was for the Greenwoods to think I was crazy. I’d vowed to tell Stormy the truth and I was betting she’d be pretty impressed by what had happened. And I knew I could trust them.

“There are stairs in Corwin’s office. Don’t tell anyone, okay? But he said that only I could get the stuff that would make the thermolizer work properly.”

“The therm ... I was right, then! It has nothing to do with the milk!”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“So you went down where Albert went?” Stormy asked.

“Yes. But I didn’t come back in a coma!”

“But why you?”

“They just saw how good a milkman I am and I was the obvious choice for the mission.”

“Really?” Stormy asked.

“Mostly.”

Sometimes it amazes me how fast a person’s thoughts can go. In the blink of an eye I weighed all the good and bad points of telling them everything. I thought of Travis being a pariah, but I’m not like him. I have a solid job and I wasn’t planning on devoting my life to weird religious beliefs. But I could tell that Stormy and Mr. Greenwood didn’t really think that I was telling the truth about going underground or, if I was telling the truth, that I wasn’t chosen just because of my milk delivering prowess. I’d have to tell the truth,

but I couldn't tell them about the interrogations. But what did it mean to always tell the truth anyways?

"So?" Stormy asked, getting impatient.

"Travis thinks I'm what they call a Seeker and I think Corwin does too. I've always had these visions and I think —"

"What the heck's a Seeker?"

"I'm not really sure...something about being able to connect with the spirits."

Stormy bolted up out of her chair.

"Connect with spirits? I think you're still not feeling well. You need rest. I have to go study for final exams."

And out she went, leaving Mr. Greenwood pulling on his pipe and looking pensive.

"Are you sure you went underground, Howie?"

"Yes, I think so. But I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

"You hear all kinds of stories about what's underground. But my advice, as someone who knows a little bit about these things - trust the facts. What you can see with your own eyes and touch with your own hands. I don't think the facts bear out the existence of spirits or ghosts."

I ran my fingers over my shirt and felt the stitches on my chest. The sharp little stubs of the catgut. I didn't say anything. He gave me a sort of fatherly smile and got up.

"Well, you finish up here with breakfast and get some rest, all right? I'll be up to check on you in a bit."

I supposed that they didn't like to hear about me possibly being a Seeker. I thought maybe I shouldn't tell anyone else about it. Maybe it wasn't true anyways. After all, I didn't get any milk from the cow. I

got stabbed. Just the same way McMyrtle got hurt somehow down there. It could happen to anyone. I decided not to worry about it. I was looking forward to a day of just lying there doing nothing and looking out the window and eating the Greenwoods' amazing food. And I would just tell Stormy I was delirious, and we'd get along again."

I didn't realize that it was going to be a busy day, and that I would be visited by three men about my subterranean journey. But just as the clock downstairs struck noon, there was a knock downstairs. I heard voices and soon after, none other than Mr. Corwin was in the room. Mr. Greenwood came up with him. Corwin had a bouquet of flowers that he handed to me.

I didn't really know what to do with them, so I just held them there. Mr. Greenwood sort of introduced me to Mr. Corwin.

"Here's our wounded soldier. On the mend."

"Howie! I was terribly worried about you. First day with a red badge and we have an accident like this. I'm so glad you're in good hands here."

"Very good hands. We had orange juice for breakfast."

Corwin smiled.

"I'll leave you two to speak."

After Mr. Greenwood left, Corwin locked the door with the key that was left in the keyhole.

"I thought you'd be able to handle the task I assigned and I'm very sorry that you weren't."

"I can try again, Mr. Corwin."

"Good, Howie. That's the right attitude. When you fall off a horse, you have to get back on right away. How long are you going to be lying here?"

“I don’t know. I already feel a lot better than yesterday. Maybe a day or two?”

“Good. You take your little holiday here and I’ll expect you back on your rounds the day after tomorrow. Also, what have you been saying about what happened?”

“What happened?”

“Yes. We don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea. Civilians don’t understand these things. You don’t want to end up in a mental institution. Or some other unpleasant place.”

“I just said that I don’t remember anything. I was just walking around and boom: I woke up here.”

“That’s a good start. I think you must have gotten some bad fish from Granard’s Chippery. I know you often get your dinner there. The fish made you hallucinate. In your delirium, you tripped and fell on a nail that was left on the road by the milk station. I’ve already told the milkmen that’s what happened. A lot of the townsfolk have likely heard the story by now. Do you have any questions?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

“You said the day after!”

“Of course. The day after. Farewell, Howie.”

I felt pretty tired after he left. Mr. Corwin thinks of everything and I felt lucky to have a man like that in my corner. But then I remembered what I’d told Stormy and Mr. Greenwood. Stormy might be out telling her friends. I started feeling queasy as my eyes rested on the yellow walls. The paisley patterns seemed to be moving up and down and it was making my stomach churn. I closed my eyes, but still I felt dizzy. At right about one o’clock, Dr. Barrett

came to visit. I told him I was feeling dizzy and ill. He said it would pass and not to worry.

“We’re lucky there was no infection. Corwin told me you’d fallen on a rusty nail. Not sure how you did that, but it must not have been too rusty. You should recover quickly. But you’re going to have to start taking better care of yourself. You’re young and strong now, but if you continue to eat poorly and not get enough sleep, you won’t be young and strong for long.”

“Tell me Dr. Can bad fish make you hallucinate? I think I got some bad fish.”

He frowned and thought about this.

“It’s possible that some fish might have elevated levels of alkaloids that could make you hallucinate. But it would be very rare and very unusual.”

“But it’s possible? I got dinner at Granard’s and I thought it tasted a bit off.”

Still frowning, the doctor went on.

“It’s not impossible. But I would be very surprised if that’s what happened.”

“It really is surprising.”

Later, after lunch, I was very surprised at my next visitor. It was Father Wheelan. I was really touched because he was visibly upset and agitated when he came into the room. He pulled up the chair just like everyone else had. I was surprised that his voice had all the gravitas of one of his sermons.

“Hello, my son. I’m very glad to see you’re okay. When they found you, we all feared the worst and someone brought me in to say the last rites. I sat up with you. But Dr. Barrett said you were

going to pull through.”

“Thank you, father Wheelan.”

“Of course, my son. It’s my duty. I did want to ask you, though, Howie. You know it’s all over town that you got some bad fish at Granard’s. Now, we both know that’s not true, right?”

“That’s what happened. Bad fish.”

Father Wheelan shifted uneasily in his too small chair.

“Granard is having a terrible time, I thought you should know. Some are talking about boycotting his shop. Others are sticking by him in his hour of need. He says he might have to close down and move away. News like this can destroy you in a small town.”

“That’s really terrible. I love his sandwiches.”

Father Wheelan looked into my eyes with great intensity.

“Those sandwiches have been a staple of life in St. Gaff’s from time immemorial, Howie. There is no finer institution on this island and no greater source of comfort available to the islanders than a warm cup of chowder on a cold rainy day. You don’t really want to do anything to ruin that do you? You’re putting that man’s livelihood at risk. You know as well as I do that there’s nothing wrong with his fish. He buys it from the few local fishermen still plying their trade here. No one’s ever had a problem.”

“Well that’s what happened.”

“Son. When they brought me to you, you spoke about visions. Evil cows, monsters, cracked pillars, a madman chasing you with a knife.”

“I guess I was just delirious.”

“These are visions of hell, my son. I fear that your soul is in great danger. It’s a sin to lie, Howie, and lying about Granard’s Chipperry

is a very grave sin.”

“But I had the visions before I told anyone about Granard’s!”

“The good lord above knows your heart, Howie. He knew the lie was on the tip of your tongue and he sent those visions to warn you. I urge you now to recant before something happens to that chippery that we will all regret.”

Stormy was still out by the late afternoon. But I felt good enough to get up. It was slow and painful, but I got to my feet and hobbled to the door.

“Hello?”

No one answered. The hallway was covered in wild purple wallpaper. I made my way down to the bathroom. In the mirror I was pale and thin. There were lots of nice things in there. Creams and a fine metal razor. There were all sorts of things in the drawers. I didn’t even know what they were all for. Medicines, ointments, flowery soaps. A big glass jar. I sniffed it. Stormy’s perfume. I heard some noises and went back to the hallway.

“Hello?”

No one. I went into the next room. I guessed that it was Mr. Greenwood’s room. There was a musty, not totally unpleasant smell. It was dim with drawn brown curtains. A huge telescope made of brass or something was aimed out one window. I could only imagine the things he could see with it. On a big dresser there were three shiny wooden pipes and a tin of tobacco. What a thing to be an established adult with all these possessions. You can make your room any way you want and you can buy all sorts of expensive things you don’t even need. I vowed to myself that one day I’d have a telescope of my own and I’d keep an eye on everything with it.

There was that noise again. It was coming from downstairs. I limped down. All the sounds were coming from a room on the side of the house. I went in and there was Mr. Greenwood tinkering away on something.

“Oh, hi Howie. Feeling better?”

“A bit.”

The room was a workshop with all types of tools and machines. He was hunched over a big cylindrical machine with hoses coming out of it. There were a bunch of certificates on the wall.

“Those are my patents.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I design machines, inventions and sell them to others to make. And the government gives me a patent so that no one else can make the same machine without paying me something. That’s how I make a living these days. See this? I’m working on something I call the Greenwood Automatic Dusting Tool. It uses a small turbine to suck dust off the floor. It uses a gas motor a little bit like an automobile, but I’ve connected the exhaust to a hose that you can hang out the window to avoid having too many fumes in the house.”

“Do you know where Stormy is?”

“She’s studying with some classmates. Two more exams and she’s done with high school. Hard to believe.”

“I never went. I guess she’ll be able to teach me a lot of things once she’s done.”

“Oh, she’s a bright girl. And ambitious. More than I ever was.”

“Did you learn how to do all this in high school?”

He sighed and stopped whatever he was doing and sat back on

his chair.

“I always liked machines. But where I learned the most was in the army. I was in the engineer corps in the last war. It’s a good thing too since I would never be able to point a rifle at another person. But I had a knack for machines and coming up with fast ways to build bridges. It was a terrible time, but I was one of the lucky ones for the most part, being behind the lines. After they saw what a knack I had, they set me up in my own workshop with a small staff and let me work away. I got paid a bit extra. There was a bit more to send home to the missus.”

“Did you ever make any really big guns or bombs?”

“Not so much. The best thing I made back then was the Greenwood Listening Machine. The army’s always called on to dig for one reason or another, and I created a machine that could listen to see if the ground was deep enough. For whatever reason the army didn’t want it. That’s my big regret.”

“And you never saw any action?”

“I don’t know if I’d say that. Actually the lines broke one day and we were overrun. My workshop. Some killed. Some taken prisoner.”

“You were a prisoner of war?”

“Yes, for a couple of years. When I finally came home, there were nightmares, and I had a case of nerves. The missus couldn’t stand it. But I found if I kept my hands busy, I could keep the nightmares away.”

Then he looked at me.

“All I want now is for Stormy to be happy. I just need one of these inventions to become popular and she’ll be set for life. Let’s hope the dusting tool does the trick, eh?”

That night I was wiped out just from walking about the house bit. But we had a nice dinner of beefsteak and potatoes and green beans. And after lights out, Stormy sneaked into my room without a word and lay down beside me. And we slept like that, side by side. With the perfume in her hair I imagined we were like a married couple and I felt really lucky, breathing in the air she breathed out. In the morning we woke up before the dawn. She rolled over and our faces were close.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. That the milkmen think you’ve got some special way to know about what’s underground. Is that true, Howie?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always had these spells. I’ve been seeing Dr. Barrett about it. But I don’t really know what it’s all about.”

“Well, if that’s what they believe, you should go with it.”

“What if they want me to go underground again?”

She thought about this a minute, then pursed her lips.

“Maybe we should get you a knife so you can fight off anything you find down there. I was just thinking. If you going down there got you a red badge, doing what they want might get you even more promotions. Maybe if you keep it up you can get a job with the department in Mingsbight. An office job and then you wouldn’t have to go underground or even deliver milk anymore.”

“But I like delivering milk.”

“I know. For now. But we have to think about the future, too. Right?”

I sort of agreed and then she left to get dressed and get ready for school. But really I wasn’t so sure I wanted to go back to Mingsbight.

I was feeling pretty restless, so I put on my uniform after she left. Stormy had sewed up the hole in the chest and cleaned it up. I'd been wearing some of her dad's old pyjamas around the house.

I went out onto the street, and it felt so good to breathe in some fresh spring air and hear the birds and everything else. I just strolled along for a while enjoying my day off and eventually, I made my way downtown. That's when I started noticing something strange. The pavement in some places was broken. I was really surprised to see that part of the postal office had collapsed and a couple of the other buildings were on a strange off kilter angle.

I didn't want to get too close to the milk station because I didn't want anyone to see me walking around when I was supposed to be on the mend. But I could still see down there that it wasn't a dream. Something was wrong with Billy on the Wall and he really was cracked in two. I stopped someone on the sidewalk, Mr. Blackwall, a customer of mine. For some reason he didn't look too happy to see me.

"Mr Blackwell? Excuse me?"

"Oh, It's you. What is it?"

"What happened? What's wrong with the buildings?"

He screwed up his face like I was some sort of idiot.

"You didn't feel the earthquake? Two nights ago?"

"No."

"Well, there was an earthquake."

And then he turned on his heel and left. An earthquake. I'd never been through one and I was annoyed that I'd slept right through it. I kept walking and saw the baker. I waved, but he frowned at me and crossed the street. Not like him at all.

You're gone a couple of days and things sure are different. I got to the Chippery and decided to go in and try to smooth things over with Granard. He was a pretty young guy, thin and tall with a red beard. He worked six days a week and had a little family I saw once. His shop was just a small place. Really just a counter and he made everything behind there. But today he was outside and locking up his shop even though it was the middle of the day.

"Hey Granard."

"What the blazes do you think you're doing here?"

"Look, Granard. I know what you're upset about. But it's not my fault, okay?"

"You told everyone my fish made you sick. Now the police tell me I've got to close the shop until a health inspector comes from the mainland. No one can say how long that's going to take and what do I do in the meantime?"

"Oh...that's terrible. I didn't realize."

"You had fish chowder if I remember. No way did it make you sick."

"How can you be so sure? Dr. Barrett told me that some fish have alkanoids that can make people hallucinate."

"I only use cod and there's no cod in the world that ever made anyone hallucinate."

There was obviously no reasoning with the man so I left him there. I was sure he'd sort it out one way or another. And I was just doing what I'd been told after all.

I continued my walk until I got to Lapham square. This was the biggest park in the town and it actually wasn't a square at all. It was actually a big circle with a fountain in the middle. The fountain was a bit cracked but still working. Long curved benches wrap all around

the fountain and you can just sit there and watch the world go by. I'd seen people do it, but I'd never just sat there myself. But today, I did. It was pretty warm and I leaned back and soaked up the atmosphere. There weren't too many people around.

I decided to take out my pipe and I stuffed it with tobacco the way I'd seen others do it. It was actually Mr. Greenwood's pipe, but I figured a man only needs one pipe and Mr. Greenwood had three, so I'm sure he wouldn't mind. I lit it and I already knew that I wasn't supposed to breath the smoke in too much. Just let it swirl around in your mouth like a glass of fine wine. It was the first time I'd smoked at all and I liked it.

This was the life, I thought. And it occurred to me that I hadn't felt so well-rested for a long, long time. All that sleep and good food at the Greenwood's had really done me some good. A hobo shuffled past and picked up an old newspaper. And then kept on shuffling. Just one of the many sides of life, I thought; some sleep in feather beds and smoke pipes and others rummage around in the garbage. The seasons keep changing, the sun goes up and down, and all is well with the world. I stretched out my feet and vowed to do this more often.

But then something struck me. I was used to seeing homeless guys all the time back home, but I didn't think there were any at all on St. Gaff's. I looked back and forth and couldn't find him right away. Then I heard a bunch of little kids laugh. Six little boys and girls, all about three years old and they were all watching the hobo. He was singing a strange little song and all the kids were yelling, "Again! Again!"

He passed right by me again and stopped. All the kids looked at him as he bent over a little.

He stuck out his hands and pulled off his finger. I almost

screamed when he looked at me and snickered.

15. Fish and Chips, Part One

Have you ever held on to a lie so hard and for so long that it hurt?

Something you knew you just couldn't tell anyone even though it was killing you inside? That's what I was going through. I had a bit of time to sit quietly and reflect on everything and I knew things would never be the same again. All I ever wanted was to be a pillar of my community. To have a big house on Grand Street and for everyone to point at me and say: 'look - there's Howie Coxwell. He started out as a plucky young lad delivering milk. And now look at him. He's got a big house on Grand Street.'

But that's not the way it was turning out. I knew now that the magician would haunt my days the way the hound did. But he was smarter. Tenacious. And it was because of him that I'd had to lie. Instead of telling everyone what had really happened, I'd concocted a crazy story about eating bad fish and falling on a nail. And that's where all my troubles began. I didn't have anything personally against Granard. Even though sometimes his chowder could have been a bit hotter and he sometimes forgot the crackers. But I never meant for him to close down his shop. He blamed me for everything, and I knew that, in a way, it was my fault. But it's not like I could tell anyone what really happened. First of all, no one would believe me. And second of all, I had a duty to the milkmen and I couldn't just go around telling trade secrets to everyone in town. If Granard had to lose his job over it, well, he was just as much a casualty of war as any boy who'd gotten his head blown off in the trenches.

But there I sat. In the dark and alone, trying to keep my breathing under control and listening for footsteps. I was in a small dark room full of smelly old brooms and mops. I was cold. I'd been sweating, but now, sitting here, I'd gotten a chill. I knew the wound in my chest was bleeding again, but there was nothing I could do about it right now. I didn't know how long I'd been in here.

What was that? I definitely heard something. I opened the door a crack to look out. But I must have elbowed one of the mops and it fell over, making all kinds of noise. Someone yanked the door open:

"No. No don't!" I shouted.

Then there was the sound of snickering, and a horrible stabbing sound.

But maybe I'd better start at the beginning.

I was in the park and the magician was doing his tricks for some kids. Then he made a horrible face and they ran off. He laughed and sat down beside me. I wanted to get up and run, but I was frozen in place.

"Hi there, Howie. Don't look so perturbed my boy. I'm your guardian angel. Watching over your shoulder all the time. Too bad the fountain's cracked. You see what happens when you start fooling around where you don't belong? Who knows what's going to come crawling out of the cracks. Nothing to say? That's alright. We can just enjoy the afternoon sitting here doing nothing."

Then, he started rubbing his stomach.

"I'm starving. Isn't there anywhere to get something good to eat in this town?"

I couldn't take my eyes away as he actually pulled off his finger...he put it in his mouth and started chewing.

I bolted up and walked away. No one else seemed to notice him. Maybe I was just imaging things. I still had the pipe in my hands. Time to go home and lie down a bit. Clear my head. Surely it was just a waking dream like Dr. Barrett said. But then I also started to notice that some people were staring at me and giving me dirty looks. One plump fellow who I didn't know at all even stopped me. He put his finger right in my chest.

“Eh. You're a damned liar, you are. You've got some nerve, you have.”

And then someone else shouted from not too far off,

“Get back to the mainland you lousy bugger.”

I just kept walking. It became clear that I was becoming unpopular. Who knew that Granard was so important to the town? It's like I'd cracked the social fabric of the community or something. I was actually a bit shocked at the ingratitude of the townsfolk. After all the milk I'd delivered, and all my efforts to suppress subversion. All they really seemed to care about was their fish sandwiches. I had some hope that the whole thing might blow over in a few days. But that afternoon, there was a knock on my door. It was Mrs. Somertag and Inspector Piercey.

“Hi there, Howie. I hope you're not in any trouble, but the police wanted to see you.”

“You'll have to come with me, son.”

“Why? Where are we going?”

“You'll find out soon enough.”

He didn't handcuff me or anything, so I figured I wasn't in too much trouble. Out on the street, I asked him again.

“There's been an emergency meeting called with the mayor. You'll have to testify.”

“About what?”

“I think you know very well what this is about, Mr. Coxwell.”

Now, I didn’t know anything about the mayor and hadn’t even heard anyone talk about a mayor. But Piercey led me to the Red Lion hotel downtown. The lobby was all red and gold with stone columns, big plush couches and there was a fancy waiter in a black suit and a big chandelier made of thousands of bits of glittering glass.

“Why are we in a hotel?”

He just shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s the mayor’s official residence. And office.”

I didn’t really know what to make of this, but I was pretty excited when we got into an elevator and Piercey pushed the button for the top floor. Up and up we went, until we got to the sixth floor. I’d never been up so high in a building before and couldn’t wait to see the view. But when we went into the room, the curtains were all drawn. There were big plush red curtains. It was a huge room. But there were some people there. Some sitting on couches. Corwin stood with a cocktail glass. Granard was there on the couch, staring knives at me.

There was a gramophone playing in the corner. A big four poster bed. A thick carpet, an ornate table with silver dishes and a half-eaten chicken dinner and bottle wine. A fire was going in the fireplace and there was a beautiful mechanical clock on the mantle. This must have been one of the most royal rooms anywhere, I thought. And then, a door opened in walked the most elegant lady I’d ever seen.

She was about fifty, maybe, with a tight black dress with lots of tassels. The dress might even have been a bit see-through, but I couldn’t quite tell. She had a necklace of white pearls. Her hair was all shiny and pinned back somehow and there was a feather stuck in her hair too. She must be the mayor, I figured.

“So this is the milkman?”

“He’s a liar!” Granard said through gritted teeth.

A nicely dressed man smoking a cigarette with a long holder spoke up without even looking my way.

“Let’s all get this over with as quickly as possible, shall we?”

The man with the cigarette continued.

“We’re here for an emergency injunction to keep Granard’s Chippery open until a health inspector arrives. Mr. Granard here alleges that Howie couldn’t have gotten sick. That no one else has ever gotten sick and that Mr. Coxwell here is really disgruntled because Mr. Granard forgot to include crackers with his last order of fish chowder.”

“That’s not true - there were crackers!”

“Quiet!” The mayor said.

And then the man went on.

“We’ve spoken with the doctor who says that there is very little chance that Mr. Coxwell could have gotten sick from fish. He suspects that something else happened to Mr. Coxwell to cause his hallucinations, but he is not at liberty to say what.”

I felt I was being sold out. They wanted to make me a patsy. I looked to Corwin pleadingly. But he said nothing. He just smiled at me with a slight air of menace. To make a long story short, it was decided that the Chippery would reopen. Apparently, I was just a liar or really confused, but in any case, not someone to be taken seriously. And then, at the end of the proceedings, the mayor clapped her hands.

“Time for dancing!”

They put on a new record and ushered all the non-official people out of the room.

Outside the hotel I walked a bit with Mr. Corwin.

“I know that wasn’t very pleasant, Howie, but I appreciate your discretion in this matter.”

With that he slapped me on the back and walked off. Granard passed me just after, smirking. The jerk.

That night I got some cold sausage and beans for dinner, but they tasted like ashes in my mouth. To have everything I’d worked so hard for crumble down to my ankles just like that. It wasn’t fair. I looked out the window. One of the two bigger fishing boats that still operated on the island was chugging out to sea. The smoke from its smokestack rising high into the heavens. I wished the boat was taking me to brighter horizons where I could start afresh. Maybe I could be a fisherman, I thought. Waking up early and getting grizzled and sunburnt. I’d be the guy with a shadowy past that didn’t say too much. But you knew you didn’t want to mess with him. I’d spend the evenings looking knowingly out to sea, smoking my pipe. And no one would bother me because they’d know I was thinking tough, manly thoughts.

The sun set on the sea and the few strands of cloud on the horizon were bright red. As it got dark my dream of becoming a fisherman was stripped of all its colour and I could see it for what it really was. Another attempt to escape from my problems. I stood up. Put my head out the window and took a deep breath. The cool sea air sharpened my mind and I knew I had to do something. The old banging started again. I was too wound up to fall asleep with her hitting the walls. And slowly...very slowly...a plan formed in my head.

I put on my regular clothes and went out. I knew what I had to do. It must have been about eleven o’clock at night. And it was a Tuesday, so I was going to be tired tomorrow. But I had no choice. I had to fix up my reputation somehow. When I got to Dr. Barrett’s

place, I snuck around the back. The door was locked, but he'd forgotten to close the back window all the way. I opened it up as quietly as I could and pulled myself inside. Once I was in there, I stood motionless and listened - I didn't hear anything except McMyrtle's breathing tubes. I crept past him. The peckerhead was still just lying there doing nothing.

He was still a milkman. I guess they figured he might wake up one day. I saw his parents sometimes at their shop. They'd hung a picture of him on the wall behind the cash register like he was some kind of saint. I was just happy I didn't have to listen to his lectures about procedures and nozzles anymore. I looked all around, through the cabinets and drawers until I found what I was looking for. I looked back at McMyrtle. His eyes were still closed. So I hopped back out the window and left.

Back out on the street I was feeling pretty good. I had the big medicine bottle shoved into my pants. The doctor hadn't heard a thing and my plan was coming apart without a hitch. The air was cool now. I stopped a second and took a deep breath. I'd come to a high point on the road where I could look out and see a big swath of the town and all the way out to the harbour. It was clear and the white moon looked like a big yellow ball of cheese. There was the church tower with its telephone inside. There was the giant hull of the ship they were building, towering over the buildings down by the harbour.

In the moonlight every one of the pastel houses looked like a kid's doll house. Red houses and blue ones and yellow. Some older ones made of stone sat at funny angles since they were older than the streets. Every house with its little people inside and its little couches and beds...a little bit of bread, a couple of empty milk bottles. Probably the same families'd been living out their lives in the same houses for ever. Everyone asleep and dreaming. Tomorrow they'd get up and go about their usual business; planning to repaint

the old boards, worrying about their kids' grades in school or whether the older kids would ever come back from the war.

One day maybe that would be Stormy and me worrying in front of the fireplace. But tonight, as I walked on, I felt like the lord of the whole island. The world kept throwing problems at me, but my mind was working like a steel clock, ticking away and coming up with the right fixes. My footsteps echoed through the quiet. But then I tripped on one of the cracks in the sidewalk they never got around to fixing. I got the wind knocked out of me, but I checked the bottle and it was fine.

Back home, I caught a few hours of sleep before I had to start my rounds. I drove extra fast today so that my plan would work out. I ignored all the bad looks, knowing that the people of St. Gaff's would see me in a new light by the end of the day. I didn't stop to talk to anyone except Stormy. I got to her place earlier than usual and she didn't have much time to talk anyways since she was freaking about her last exam. Math.

She said some kids including her and Molly were going to the drug store to celebrate after and that I should come by. By then, my plan would be working and I couldn't wait to meet up with her and see how proud she'd be of me. But like I said, I was also rushing around. So around 11, before lunch, I made an unscheduled stop. I knew from experience that Granard got his fish around this time and I was there when the fisherman was making his delivery, bringing in a few boxes through the front door.

Now, to explain, I knew that I couldn't go on being accused of ruining Granard's business as a mere frivolity. I knew that the only way to regain my fellow man's esteem was to make sure that I wasn't the only one who got sick from the fish. And anyways, the people deserved it for not believing me. So I hung around a little ways off watching the fish get unloaded, and then, when Granard was paying the fisherman and chit chatting with him on the

sidewalk, I snuck around the back alley. Lots of people didn't lock their doors around here, unlike back home. So I ducked inside, opened the bottle of Podexium and poured it into the big pot of chowder Granard was making for lunch. Just after the last drop dropped, Granard came in.

"Hey! What the hell are ya doin here?"

"Oh! I just wanted to come by and say that there's no hard feelings about everything. I guess I must have made a mistake and probably I didn't get sick from your fish."

"And ya had to sneak in the back to do that? Get out o here you rascal."

So out I went. If he couldn't let bygones be bygones it wasn't my problem. I knew I was the bigger man since I was the one who'd come to apologize to him.

I went about the rest of my day feeling pretty good. I whistled a tune to myself the whole time I sprayed for flies. I could just imagine. Everyone was going to be saying to themselves, 'Boy oh boy we should have listened to that Howie.'

But when I got to the drug store, Stormy wasn't there. And Molly wasn't there either. Leo her classmate was there. I didn't really want to talk to him, but I did anyways.

"She never showed up for the exam. I don't know where she is."

This made me pretty worried so off to the Greenwood house I went. When I got there, Mr. Greenwood had some bad news:

"Hi Howie, I'm afraid Stormy's taken ill. She and Molly were found dancing in the fountain in Lapham Square. She came home soaking wet and she's resting now. Go ahead. I'm sure she'd like to see you."

Up in her room, I winced when I saw the familiar old yellow wallpaper. And there was Stormy, looking dazed and tired.

“Howie...I don’t know what happened...Molly and I...we were on our way to school, and we just started feeling so...weird...and then I must have blacked out. But...I missed my exam! I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“That’s awful. Where did you go for lunch?”

“Granard’s.”

“Granard’s! How could you after I got so sick there?”

“It was open...I thought it was fine now...My dad spoke to Mr. Jenkins, the math teacher...he says he saw me and Molly dancing in the fountain on his way home and we were just skipping school and probably drunk...I don’t know what to do...He’s going to make me come back and do the course again next year when I’m supposed to be graduating this summer.”

I left Stormy’s house feeling pretty upset. I had half a mind to go see Mr. Jenkins and give him a piece of my mind. But I just didn’t have time. At the milk station, I must have been looking pretty down in the mouth. Frank and Beaver were waiting for me. I was supposed to go up to the radio station tonight.

“Why so glum, chum?” Frank asked.

I told him all about Stormy’s troubles and the annoying teacher.

“You want us to go have a chat with him?”

Frank asked.

“Why would you go talk to him?”

Then Beaver piped up,

“He’s distracting you from your work. Unacceptable.”

I figured that if they could convince Mr. Jenkins, then that was great. On my way out of town I stopped at Skipper Jim's Cafe. I'd never been in there, but now I felt I had little choice. I couldn't very well go to Granard's. I parked the truck, went in, grabbed a chicken sandwich to go and walked back out. It felt like a pretty substantial sandwich, and I was looking forward to eating it at the shack while the sun went down. But right in the middle of my reverie, there was Granard. He looked very angry and when he saw me his face turned red.

"Come'ere you bastard!"

Then he pulled out a long file knife and ran at me. But he'd made a serious tactical mistake because he was still about half a block away and I had enough time to hop in the truck and gun the motor before he got to me. In the side mirror, I could see him stomping mad on the sidewalk.

"Peckerhead" I said to myself as I eased onto the road out of town.

And there I was, free as a bird that someone let out of its cage. The rolling countryside rolled by. The afternoon wind blew in my face. I passed farms, woods, and then there was Mount Glenmoy in the distance. As I pulled up to the shack I felt like nothing could touch me. It was close to five, so I went in and decided to send off the message before having my dinner. So I sat down, spread out my sheet of paper. Got the record player ready and off I went.

BRAKA BRAKA BRAKA.

38475 38476 38475

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BRAKA BRAKA BRAKA

Then, instead of hanging up the receiver, I stopped and thought a second. I figured these messages were probably going to the

Department of Lactic Affairs on the mainland. I decided I would just ask them directly.

“If you’re there, this is Howie Coxwell on St. Gaff’s island. I’m just wondering when you’ll be sending my red badge over. It’s been a while now so if you could send it right away that would be great. Thanks a lot.”

And I hung up. Hopefully that will get the wheels moving, I thought. On the bench outside, I took in the view as I unwrapped the sandwich. It smelled pretty good. But then I heard something. Another motor. I stood up so I could see better. And I recognized Granard’s truck. And he was really moving, too. How did he know I was up here? No time to worry about that now. Mournfully, I rewrapped my sandwich and hopped into the truck. The road up was pretty narrow, and I didn’t want to risk having him bump into me and damage company property. So I turned the truck around, and started down the other side of the mountain heading west. I’d never gone that way before and didn’t know what I’d find.

The road meandered down, switchback after switchback. Not many people drove down this way judging by the shape the road was in. There were weeds all over the place. I didn’t know if Granard was still chasing me, but I was driving too fast to take my eyes off the road. I couldn’t see anything in the mirrors. Maybe he gave up? But I kept going anyways. I didn’t want to take any chances. Still, I found myself forgetting that I was being pursued, and admiring the landscape. It was definitely more rugged on this side of the island. Hillier, with denser plants and trees.

And that made it even more surprising when the road opened out onto a little collection of low, bare concrete buildings on the coast. But it was odd. Some of the buildings weren’t finished being built. There was concrete with metal rebars sticking out, as if they’d just stopped halfway through building them. Then I noticed there were

gun turrets and a kind of concrete reinforced trench. This must have been some kind of army hideout. Now it was all overgrown and awful looking.

I hopped out to see if I could hear anything, and sure enough, I heard Granard's truck not too far away. I jumped down into the trench and found an open door. I went in and closed it behind me.

Inside, it was dark and musty smelling, but I was sure I'd find somewhere to hide in here. It was some kind of control room with peep holes for looking out to sea. The only light in the place came in from the peep holes. There were big machines I didn't recognize. There was some scurrying, and I figured the rats must have taken the place as their home. Then the door opened behind me and I rushed into the first room I could find. It turned out to be a janitor's closet.

"Howie?!? Podexium? What the hell is Podexium?"

Then I remembered: I must have left the medicine bottle in the fish shop. That was really careless.

"I'm gonna gut you when I find you, you miserable bastard!"

Then I also remembered Granard's filet knife. And as I said at the beginning, I heard a strange noise, opened the door to take a peek, knocked over the mop. The door got pulled open, and then I heard that horrible stabbing sound.

16. The Pirates of Jeddore, Part One

The mop fell, and the sound brought me back to the time when my dear old dad was in jail. He had a mop just like it when he was working maintenance, and I'll never forget the sound of it falling. Like I said before, thoughts are quick, and all in a moment, all my younger years passed before my eyes. My earliest memories of dad chasing me around the flat and me hiding in a closet full of clothes, behind mom's dresses. I could still feel how scared and excited I was that he'd find me in there. I could still see him and mom watching me while I spun around singing some crazy song I'd made up in our old living room in the bigger place. His eyes, smiling at me. I remembered how proud I was when dad and me, but mostly dad, carved a wooden race car for school. It didn't go very fast, but to me it was the most amazing car in the world.

We lived on the top floor of an old row house. The whole block was one continuous row of houses, all connected, all brown, all with the same dilapidated roofs and brick chimneys. It was not far from the factory and not too far from the river Kierston. Outside, there were no lawns like they have on St. Gaff's. Just sidewalk and a narrow potholed street. It was always kind of foggy and yellow outside. Not that I really noticed until I finally left the place. But there were other kids around and sometimes some of them would play with me.

From when I was really young, I remembered after being put to bed, I'd stare out the window. There weren't any blinds or anything

and in the summer, it took a long time after I was lying there for it to get dark. Was some thief going to sneak in and get me? Every night I'd fall asleep wondering. Sometimes my special friend would come and invite me to sneak out. Late at night or earlier in the morning. A little blue haired girl named Quint. She was nice. A cherubic little smile and always giggling. We were friends a long time.

Like I said a while ago, when I was three and a half, I followed her out to a ditch and fell in. Dad came and pulled me out. They just figured I was a sleepwalker and the doctor told them not to worry. But he made sure to charge mom 5 Ruperts to tell her not to worry.

But Quint kept inviting me out to show me things. Once she took me to the big garbage bin at the end of the block. There was a model ship someone threw out and I brought it home. But mom and dad didn't see what a neat find it was and said it smelled like pee. They got mad at me and threw it away again.

Time went on and I got bigger, but Quint would still sometimes visit. I didn't know exactly what she wanted. Once in a while she'd ask me to go to dark places with her. I didn't want to go and just told her I wasn't allowed to.

But with the falling mop ringing in my ears, I recalled that day when I was not quite twelve and still didn't know at all how the world around me worked. But I was big enough to cause some real trouble.

I was lying in bed when Quint came by and told me about some really neat bottles that were just lying around somewhere. It was late, but I snuck out. Down the smelly carpeted stairs and out the front door. There was a definite smell to the air, burning coal, and the first chill of fall. It got my heart pumping and made me want to go on some kind of adventure.

"Come on!" she said, disappearing around a corner.

I followed, and sure enough, a couple blocks away, in a box outside the pub, there were a bunch of empty bottles from some sort of fancy liquor.

“You know what would be funny? Shove them under the tires of the cars!”

And there were a couple of cars parked outside, so I took a couple bottles and put them up against the tire. As soon as the car drove off, the tire would pop! I put the last bottle behind a wheel, when I felt a large hand around the back of my neck. He pulled me up and turned me around.

“And what in god’s blue heaven do you think you’re doing there, son?”

It was a cop. And that’s when I noticed I’d put the bottles behind the tires of a cop car.

“I didn’t mean...I just...”

“You didn’t mean it? Was an accident, eh? You little shit muncher.”

He was a middle-aged man with a patchy blond moustache.

When dad’s voice rang out,

“Hey! That’s my son! Hands off!”

The cop dropped me on the sidewalk, which also hurt. Dad must have followed me.

“Ah, so he’s your little brat. And this is how you raise him? Vandalizing police property in the middle ah the night when he should be home asleep?”

“He walks in his sleep.”

“And I suppose he regularly steals bottles and tries to pop men’s

tires, then does he? While he's asleep, even?"

I'd gotten to my feet at this point.

"I didn't mean it! It was an accident!"

The cop looked down at me, and faster than I could see, there was blinding white pain and I was on the ground. He'd given me the back of his hand right across my face. And just like that, dad had him pinned against his car, punching him in the face. Dad was bigger than the cop, but out of nowhere, another cop appeared and pulled dad off. And then they had dad in the back of the car in handcuffs. I saw his eyes as they pulled away and they were mad. Whether mad at me or the police, I didn't know. But I was faced with the task of going home, waking mom up and telling her the police had dad. It was from about that time, when I was twelve, that I had to start doing a lot more around the house. Mom started forgetting about food and other things. They were going to keep dad in jail for a year.

I kept hoping Quint would come by again, but I didn't see her for a while after that. The other kids on the street were too busy to play, and I found myself sneaking out at night. It wasn't hard to get out. I just tip toed down the stairs and out the door. The top stair, which was close to mom's room, was really creaky, but I guess she never heard. I poked around the neighbourhood and saw all the places where the vagrants slept. Old rusty playgrounds with dusty trees no kid would dare go in. The filthy creek that ran behind the factory with all the weird sludge in it and the big rats rustling through the bushes.

One night, I was out wandering around and I decided to see how far I could go. Past the factory, the school, the gas works. I ended up down by the port where I'd never been before. It was a lonely, dirty place. Every once in a while you'd see people sleeping in their clothes in doorways. I guess I should have been scared, but I wasn't.

I kept playing over and over again in my mind what had happened to my poor dad. If I hadn't gone out that night, he never would have gotten thrown in jail.

Nothing really made sense to me anymore and I didn't know what the future held. My teachers were always mad at me for snoozing in class and they sent letters home that mom never opened. She just threw them on the pile of other letters she never got around to opening. We would have gone to visit dad, but the jail they sent him to was in the next county over and we didn't have any way of getting out there.

Anyways, I kept turning all my misfortunes over and over in my head. And I got mad. I wanted to do something but I didn't know quite what. I was walking down a garbage strewn lane with row houses that were a lot worse than mine. There was a staircase for when the houses caught fire and I walked up and got onto the roof. I walked along, balancing on the slope. There was a drunk singing somewhere in the distance and it made me feel even more lonesome. Back then the stars were white and I could see a long way over the town. And I decided to show Mingsbight who was boss. So I started ripping shingles off the roof and throwing them down onto the street. When I got tired of that, I started kicking an old crumbling chimney.

And that's when I met them.

All of a sudden, from out of nowhere, I was surrounded by kids about my age and younger. There were five of them. They were dressed up like pirates and they even had wooden swords they were pointing at me.

"Halt right there you booger headed scoundrel!" The one with the red handkerchief shouted at me.

He seemed to be the leader.

"Who dares to raise his bleeding arms against the land of

Jeddore?” Shouted the youngest one with a real scar on his cheek.

“I was just going for a walk..I didn’t —“

“Quiet! Or we’ll strike down your stinky noggin. To the king with him!”

They tied up my hands and I couldn’t do anything about it. I got better look and these were thin, dirty kids. But they weren’t fooling around. At wooden sword-point I walked down the stairs and onto the street. They marched me along to who knows where.

“Trespassers will be stabbed in their awful brains!”

“No one knocks down any chimneys around here but us!”

I heard the drunk singing again, and when we rounded a corner, there was a cop staggering along and singing. Then he saw us and tried to straighten up a bit.

“Get off the street, you buggers, it’s 4 o’clock in the morning.”

“You’re pickled again, bobby. Go sleep it off,” said the leader.

“I’m the law around here, you brats!”

The cop fumbled with his club but managed to get it loose. He lunged at us and the kids scattered. The youngest one with the scar tripped and fell and the cop took a swing at him. With my hands tied behind my back, I couldn’t really go anywhere. But I threw my body at the cop and knocked him over before his club connected with the kid.

“Bastard!” The cop shouted and he tried to get back on his feet. But he kept stumbling and slipping because he was so drunk. By this time a lot more pirate kids were swarming in.

“Get the booby!” One shouted and they rained their wooden swords upon the cop until he finally got to his feet and ran off, a cut bleeding over his eye. But he’d dropped his club. One kid, about 12

maybe, picked up the club and looked at me. He was their king and unlike the others he had on a real pirate hat. A big black one.

“And who be this sorry potato eater?”

The one with the red handkerchief answered.

“We found his scrawny arse sneaking on the roof, kicking away at one of our chimneys! But, he defended Scar from the drooling bobby!”

The king thought about all of this for a minute.

“I didn’t know it was your chimney!” I protested.

“Silence! He’s never been round these parts before. No excuse, mind. But he showed us he’s got a true pirate’s heart. And tonight, he’s one of us. The pirates of Jeddore!”

A great cheer went up and the king gave me the bobby’s billy club.

“We’ll call him Club Fist!”

And we spent the night whooping and hollering through the neighbourhood. I found out later the king’s name was McGowan, but everyone called him McGoohan and that none of the pirates had parents or anywhere really to live. This began the period of my life where I ran wild with the pirates of Jeddore whenever I could. We knocked over a lot of chimneys, and chased a lot of old geezers around. I couldn’t go out there all the time, though, and I never figured out where they slept in the day. It was hanging out with the pirates that I got to know a lot of the parts of Mingsbight I’d never been to. In fact, I’d never really been too far from home at all and didn’t realize how big the city really was. I told them about my dad getting tossed in jail, thinking it would make me sound tough. But for the pirates, me having a dad meant I was like a rich man trying to hang out with poor people.

And then one day, Dad came home. Mom and I were so happy to

have him back. But it all seemed a bit strange after a year. Mom was still forgetting things all the time and dad was in a bad mood all the time now. He'd get mad at just about anything. And part of me wanted to hug him and play like we used to, but somehow I couldn't. I couple nights after he was back I was feeling really restless. So I snuck out and made my way down to the port where I knew the pirates would be. I was walking down one of the shabby old streets, when a bunch of shingles fell all around me and I heard the kids laughing. I looked up and there was Scar, whose real name was Shane, and some others. A few really young ones I didn't recognize.

"Club Fist! You lived through the cannonade! Now it's time for you to take the test!"

They brought me up to the rooftops and we walked along until we found McGoohan. To my astonishment, he was holding a great soldier's rifle!

"We wrenched it from the clutches of a dead potato eater!" He explained, "And now it's time to prove your mettle."

I went with McGoohan, Shane and a few others a little further along the rooftops.

"You see that mangy old slobberer down there? Don't ye think he'd look better with a lead ball hole in his head?"

And he handed me the rifle. I took it, but try as I might, I couldn't even aim the thing at the poor old dog sleeping in the miserable weedy backyard.

"A blight on your flowery liver!" Mcgoohan said as he grabbed the rifle and in one motion, cocked it and shot the dog. The sound of the shot echoed through the canyons of alleys and laneways, but no one stirred. The dog barely even moved. Just slumped down dead. Then McGoohan shoved the gun back into my hands.

"You see how cinchy it is? Now to find another."

“Hey! Gimmie that thing. What the hell are you doing out here?”

It was dad. He tore the gun out of my hands. Wooden swords were drawn and pointed at him. He must have followed me here.

“Stand and deliver, scoundrel! Your gold or your guts!”

“Hey! That’s my dad!”

“So you really do have a da’ after all?”

Dad looked down into the backyard.

“Did you shoot that dog?!?”

“No!”

“Don’t you lie to me.”

“I didn’t!”

“Come on” And he pulled me away to the sound of giggles from the pirates.

“By the whaler’s mother. Are you out of your goddamned mind? What kind of lunatic shoots a dog in someone’s backyard?”

On the way home, I tried to explain what had happened but I’m not sure if dad ever really believed that I didn’t shoot the dog. We never spoke about it again, but the thing just sat there between us like a ball of black, stomach-churning mold. After that, I couldn’t go back to the pirates. They’d think I was a coward for not shooting the dog and for being a daddy’s boy with my dad coming to ‘rescue’ me when I was almost thirteen years old. I still snuck out sometimes. I still fared poorly at school. Mom still stared blankly out the window while her cigarette burned down to her fingers. Dad got his job back at the factory, but he’d lost his seniority on account of being jailed and away for so long. I still sometimes played with the kids at school, but they weren’t like the pirates.

This was all a few years before the big war broke out and the days washed by in a blur of pale yellow fog and factory soot. I had no direction, no dreams and no hopes. Mom and dad didn't talk to each other much any more. They were awake a lot in the night, which made sneaking out harder. I sometimes caught dad staring at me with this worried, angry look.

Then, one day, Quint came back. But she was older. Almost decayed looking and her giggles were more of a cackle. Once again she invited me to go with her to the dark places. And this time, for the first time, in the midst of my doldrums, I went. She grabbed my hand with her cold clammy hand and we walked down some street I'd never been down before. The gas lamps were all broken around here. And then it's like the road started sloping down and down and down we sank. Until we were at the place under the cemetery where all the bodies hung like sides of beef from dangling rope. Dripping down on us. Quint played with the puddles of blood and told me this could be our secret place. I woke up retching and vomiting out my sorrows onto a neighbour's measly little garden box. I'd woken her up and she was poking me with a broom. The police came and took me home to my parents.

"Drunk he was," the police told my dad.

And I couldn't convince my parents otherwise. They just wanted to know where I'd gotten the liquor and there was no way I could tell them about the nightmare I'd had. They tried their best to write it off as a one time stunt, especially since my birthday was coming up. They asked me what I wanted, but I didn't know. And then on the day, there was a sad vanilla cake with candles. Dad had gotten me a model ship like the one I'd found in the trash long ago. In a rare glimmer of his old self, dad asked,

"Do you like it? I thought we could build it together."

But even as he said it, I think he knew we never would make it

together. That things had changed and his little boy wasn't there any more and that we could never go back. That evening, I said I was going out with some friends and mom mumbled something about 'have fun.' I walked out to the river Kierston and followed it to where it opened out onto the sea. The sun was going down and it turned the sea and all of Mingsbight red. I walked to the end of the pier with my back to the town and cried out every tear I had into the river. Crying for the twelve years I knew were behind me and would never come back. Crying because I knew I'd never again see the hope and happiness I'd once seen reflected in my father's eyes.

17. The Pirates of Jeddore, Part Two

Soon after my thirteenth birthday, the war broke out. And dad was one of the first to join up. He was almost excited to go off to war. I remember the morning he headed off with a buddy of his. They were joking around like I'd never seen him do before. He had a uniform and a rifle and a mess tin. I thought for sure he was going to storm the enemy lines and take some crucial enemy position and bring down the Weylanders all by himself. He'd be in the papers and I would tell everyone it was my dad who'd won the war. My keenest wish that day was to be old enough to go off with dad and mow down the enemy with a machine gun. I told my dad I wanted to go with him to fight and I looked up into his face to see what he thought.

What I wasn't expecting was the boring monotony that we settled into after he'd gone. When it was just mom and me, she fell back into her old forgetful ways. I tried to cheer her up like I'd done when I was little, but she was always in some far-off place. Rationing cards, metal drives, awful news from the trenches. Letters from dad, mostly blacked out. I had bread and molasses most nights for dinner. A lot of the men were gone. I tried not to give mom too much trouble. A lot of the mothers on our street went to work in the factories or knitting uniforms and things for the soldiers, but mom said she couldn't because she had to watch me.

I did my best to go to school and to say no to Quint when she showed up. But sometimes I still had my spells and woke up in the early morning down by the river or in a neighbour's backyard and was too tired to stay

awake at school. Mom couldn't afford to keep taking me to doctors who didn't do anything but charged a bunch of money. So she took me to see the local priest, even though we weren't church goers. He said some prayers and said I was sure to grow out of it. So she took me to see Madame Odella who pretended to be scared of me. She told mom to burn some herbs in our house and to give me this revolting tea and then told us not to come back. But still I kept having spells.

I woke up sometimes at night when mom was crying. But I always drifted back to sleep pretty quickly. Her sobs echoing through my dreams. And then, a few months later, Dad came home again. But he was deaf in one ear because of some big gun or bomb or something that had gone off too close to him. He had a tattoo now of a harp on his arm. Mom was really overjoyed and didn't care about his ear at all. She even managed to scrounge up some eggs for breakfast one morning. But Dad was really tired out, and soon fell back into his gloomy angry moods.

As it turned out, the war was going badly even though our country, Tow Law, was much bigger and better than our northern former colony, Weyland. Like I said a while ago, a year or two into the war, the Weylanders even took over part of Mingsbight and there were soldiers all around our school. A bunch of new kids came to our school because theirs got bombed. Some kids went to check out the annexed part of town and I would have gone too, but I felt that mom needed me at home. The school kids were really pretty boring compared to the pirates I'd once run with, anyways.

Eventually, our side got the Weylanders out of Mingsbight and things settled back to normal. Dad kept getting more and more sullen and I think his moods started bringing mom down too. They talked less and less. I kept getting in trouble at school for not doing my work or for doing it really badly. I was tired a lot of the time and was trying my best. But that didn't matter to the teachers.

One morning, I walked up the front door of the school and saw a bunch of the older kids sitting on the steps smoking and watching me and I just turned around and left. I spent the day walking all around the city, looking at houses and daydreaming. I drifted down to the university and had my lunch on a bench. The next day, the same thing happened. I realized that I hadn't done some math homework and I was going to get in trouble, so I just walked off. The school sent letters, but I don't know if anyone read them.

I also went out a lot at night, sometimes all night, which annoyed my parents at first, but then I guess they figured I was old enough now to take care of myself. A few times, I ran into Quint and we'd go down to the shore. We'd slip out into the sea and listen to the stories of the drowned sailors in the harbour until the dark things came and we had to get away.

The days went on and blurred into each other. I discovered that the more you don't go to school, the harder it is to go back. I figured it probably didn't matter that much. As if you need math when you're fighting on the front lines. I just had to wait a couple of years and I'd go off a fighting man. I knew I was a strategic thinker and was sure I'd distinguish myself in the war. Then when I came home, I'd be able to do whatever I wanted. But I never explained any of this to mom and dad. One time at the market, mom and I ran into my English teacher, Mrs. Colpus, a withered old prune. She saw me. She saw mom, and decided to put on a bit of a show.

"Mr. Coxwell, how good to see you young man. Are you planning on joining us again this term?"

And then she turned to mom.

"You must be aware Mrs. Coxwell, that Howie has been skipping school with disturbing regularity since October. We've sent several letters that were supposed to be signed and returned."

Mom looked at me and looked at Mrs. Colpus and stammered something about it being tough with the war.

“The war affects us all, Mrs. Coxwell, but if Howie doesn’t complete his studies, he’s not going to have much of a future ahead of him.”

I wished the old bitch would drop dead right then and there and I swore to myself that if there was any way I could get back at her one day, I would. But to my great surprise, when we got home, there were no punishments, no stern talks. And I learned that day that sometimes you can behave so extremely badly that your parents can’t even begin to handle it and they don’t even do anything to punish you. The next day, mom made my school lunch as usual without a word. And things just went on more or less the way they had been going.

I started spending more time with Quint around then. We’d have long talks. We’d been hanging out a long time, but she didn’t seem much older than when we’d first met. Although in some lights she looked much older and wrinkled. She told me I could always go home with her any time I wanted and that all my friends missed me and were waiting for me. But I told her that I couldn’t just leave my parents. I was an only child, after all. She sometimes played jokes on me - like the time she pushed me in front of a bus. But I got out of the way at the last second. Sometimes she got mad and said that if I didn’t come home soon, my friends were going to be very cross with me.

One time we were playing on an old swing set. We both jumped off our swings at the same time and fell down into the biggest garbage pile you ever saw. The sky was on fire, but somehow it didn’t bother me. We rooted around trying to find interesting things. We put on old musty torn clothes and pretended to be the old people who’d died in them. We threw old bottles at each other and laughed when they smashed. I picked up little gears and bits of wood and thought I might make myself a radio, until, the movement aroused

the interest of the big, bright green worm things that lived in the heap. They came crawling out and they were fast. Little pincers moving and eye stalks twitching this way and that, watching us. So Quint and I ran off into the very early morning with that smell of plants exhaling. I felt that tired stomach feeling. But Quint kept egging me on: 'hit it! Hit it!' I didn't know what she was talking about until I found myself swinging a big stick like some sort of bat - and - smash! I'd broken the fanciest gas lamp I'd ever seen on the front lawn of some rich person's house. If I hadn't been on the tail end of a spell, I would have run off like the dickens. I'd learned that much from the pirates. But I just stood there dumbfounded staring at the broken glass and listening to the hiss of the gas spewing out into the universe and Quint's giggles as she ran away.

And here comes the owner in his pyjamas, mad as the devil. And he drags me into his car and drives me down to the police station. And me all the while just in a daze and going along like a lost puppy. The police brought me home and explained things to my parents, who were just waking up and didn't even know I'd snuck out. The rich homeowner had come along and clearly wanted to instill some lessons about moral fortitude into both me and my parents. Dad, to my surprise, shook off his usual lethargy and argued every which way that it wasn't his responsibility and that he shouldn't have to pay for the lamp. But the police were having none of it. And, like I said, it was a fancy lamp. The rich old guy called my dad and me ne'erdowells, and dad was apoplectic and yelling that he was a veteran and what the old fart done for his country anyways. But in the end, Dad had to pay and it was a lot of money. The worst thing was that dad was late again to the factory. I'd had a couple of these incidents when I was out all night against my will, and dad got so angry he lost track of time and went in late. But a factory isn't like any old shop. If you're not there on time, a whole pile of people might be left waiting around because everything has to happen in a

certain order and if one person isn't there, it's a problem for the whole lot of them. So the foreman told dad to go back home and they didn't need him anymore. So not only did he have to pay a week's wages for the lamp, he no longer had a wage to pay it with. And there was the inevitable yelling session. And that's when dad said something to me that really stuck with me. He said it calmly because he'd thought about it.

"Your mother and I could have had such a nice life. Do you know that?"

After he said that, I just walked out the door and decided to let dad have some time to cool off. And even though it had been a long while I found myself wandering down to the port lands. I wandered this way and that, but secretly, I knew I was looking for the pirates of Jeddore. I wandered down the old laneways we used to terrorize, but I didn't see any pirates right away. I thought maybe they'd disappeared, until I saw, beside a dumpster, two pirates talking quietly to a cop. They exchanged a few words and I saw them give something to the cop and then he walked off. I didn't recognize these pirates. They were maybe 10 or 11, with wooden swords and colourful pirate rags. But I walked towards them. They drew their swords when I got close.

"Who's this snot-face sneaking around and watching us in the dark?"

"Tell us your name or die!"

"I'm Howie...I used to be one of you...you know McGoohan? We were mates back in the old days."

"McGoohan, eh? When's the last time you seen him?"

"Four or five years ago."

"Well, Billy, he's either a Pirate from the olden days or a stinky old snooper. Either way, he's coming with us."

So they marched me along at sword point, until we got to the abandoned old sugar refinery.

“Is this where — “

“Silence! Or we’ll slice out your tongue!”

We went to the basement and through a tunnel they’d dug out. It led to other tunnels that were maybe for sewers or trains, but they were quiet, until we came to a big opened out room full of candles and lamps. And all the pirate kids were lounging around or sitting on old mattresses and blankets. There were piles of trinkets they must have scavenged. And the kids brought me to a pirate wearing McGoochan’s old pirate hat. But when he turned around, it was Scar! And he was about 12 now. The kids all gathered around. Scar was the only one I recognized.

“We found this loafer sneaking around, saying he’s an old pirate of yore”

“Shane!” Don’t you remember me? It’s Howie!”

He looked me over.

“I don’t remember any Howie. Stab him in his eyeballs!”

The other kids grabbed me.

“Remember, I couldn’t shoot the dog! With McGoochan? My dad came to get me?”

Scar put up his hand for the kids to not stab me in the eyeballs.

“Right, the lily-livered boy”

Scar was always a joker, but I could tell he was happy to see me.

“And what do you think you’re doing coming back here?”

“I came to see McGoochan. To ask for help.”

“McGoohan is no more. Traded in his captain’s hat for a helmet. He told a fib about his birthday and they dragged him off to the trenches. But it was only a short trip. He got his reward for joining the potato eaters. Came right back in a box three weeks later. We went to see him off at the coffin house. Peaked under the lid. And McGoohan was just a pile of ashes.”

And Scar spat on the floor.

“We’ve all sworn a promise upon our red beating hearts to never join the old people’s war. Release him.”

The kids let me go.

“You can stay with us tonight for old time’s sake. But you’re no pirate.”

They lent me some old blankets. I curled up in a corner and drifted off to sleep, dreaming of poor old McGoohan burning up and screaming his poor young life away. That was enough to put the idea of joining the army out of my head forever.

The next day, we woke up in the early afternoon and I hung around with the pirates for a while. Under Scar, the pirates had been making a lot of money procuring things that no one else could get because of the rationing. They knew people at the portlands and it turned out that the police were about their best customers. They treated me to some breakfast sausages and other goodies I hadn’t seen for a dog’s age. And then it was time for me to go.

The only other time I saw the pirates was right after it happened. I went down to find them and begged Scar to help me out for old time’s sake. I told him what had happened, and he gave me a bunch of Ruperts. And he also sent a couple kids with me to help get me on the ferry to St. Gaff’s. The kids paid a sailor a little something, and he hid me in a closet for the whole ride over, then helped me sneak off.

After leaving the pirates, I just sort of wandered around. I didn't know if I was going to go home, or whether I would start up my own gang of kids, maybe in my neighbourhood. I knew enough to live off the street now. I could make contacts and smuggle contraband like the pirates and probably I'd make a pretty good living at it, too. I was setting out my plans when I sat down on a bench by the university downtown. Someone had left an old copy of the *Tow Law Runner* on the bench, and Eliza Pike was on the cover. I'd been reading her stories for a couple of years now. It's like they took me away to a distant place for a while while I read them. To my surprise, this issue was the one with the first Eliza story I'd ever read in it. The one that had gotten me hooked in the first place. I flipped to the story and read the whole thing again.

The story was about a boy like me who had a medical fit and disappeared into the night. His parents were totally distraught and willing to do anything to get him back. His mother was pasting notices on every lamppost. Eliza spotted the mother putting up a lost child notice and decided to get involved. The grandfather insisted on meeting with Eliza and told her that he'd pay her whatever it would take to get the boy back. But Eliza was already rich, so she didn't want his money. She pieced together the clues. The boy had left behind an empty pill bottle, a partially burned bank deposit slip, and a shoehorn.

Eliza did some sleuthing and figured out that the boy had gotten the wrong prescription from the drunken pharmacist whose son had just been killed in the war. Instead of his anti-fit medicine, he got a powerful hallucinogenic drug and must have wandered off while imagining who knows what. So Eliza consulted a doctor who told her that most people experiencing powerful hallucinations believed that the images were coming from the gods. So Eliza deduced that the boy would be at, or perhaps near, a church. So she scoured the places of worship, and sure enough she found him and brought him home. But, in a final twist, Eliza delved deeper into the bank slip.

She'd noticed that the boy wore slip on shoes and had no need of a shoehorn, while the grandfather had very fancy shoes that were probably really uncomfortable and hard to put on. So after more digging around, she figured out that the drunken pharmacist hadn't been acting alone. The grandfather had put the druggist up to it. It all had to do with a secret trust fund the grandfather wanted to get his hands on, and his evil desire to take control of the boy's life. But instead, the lost boy was safe and sound with his loving parents thanks to Eliza's heroics. I could only imagine how awful it would be to have people fighting over you like that. But the sheer brilliance of Eliza's detective work astonished me. Just from little details like a shoehorn she was able to unravel these elaborate schemes.

I got up from the bench and just kept turning over the details of the story in my mind. The father trying hard to do his job, but his boss telling him to go home and rest because it must be so stressful to lose a child, Eliza's interrogation of the pharmacist and his incoherent blabbering responses. Except for him accidentally letting on that he kept a lot of weird hallucinogenics that no one ever used in his back closet. It was sheer genius.

At this point I was getting pretty hungry, so I took a risk and knocked on the door of my house. My parents let me back in without much comment. Mom made me bread and molasses for dinner and I'll always remember how great it tasted. But the house was different now. My parents had packed up a lot of our things and had started moving into a room in a nearby apartment building. They'd already thrown out the toys I'd had as a kid. Dad had a new job as the maintenance man for two or three of these buildings that were all owned by the same person. So we got a ground floor room and dad had to work all different hours. Before moving, mom and dad sat me down and told me I could stay if I followed some new rules: a curfew, and they didn't want to see any more letters from school. It was a funny thing to move all of a sudden like that and just never go back to your old room.

The new place wasn't as nice as the old one. The window in the living room was close to the garbage bins at the back. And it was cold since it was winter. We didn't have as much money and instead of radiators like the old house that just went most of the time, in this building you had to put coins into a machine and the radiator would get warm for 20 minutes at a time. But, since we were broke, mom made some little metal circles that she could stuff into the machine to get it to work. But at the end of every week a man would come by to collect the money and he'd make mom give him real coins for every fake one she'd put in.

I started going back to school more regularly. And I started paying attention in class. I spoke to Mrs. Colpus and told her I'd turned over a new leaf and was committed to my future. She gave me a sickly smile, and I think we both knew that we still hated each other's guts. But still, I applied myself. That was because, at first slowly, but then surely, an idea began to form in my head. An idea that hung onto me like a dog that had bitten my leg and wouldn't let go. I was going to become a writer of serialized stories for the Tow Law Runner. I would go straight and become a rich and famous writer. And I had a whole silo full of stories in my head because I was going to write all my stories about my own experiences. It was going to be called, 'The Extraordinary Adventures of the Pirates of East Mingsbight.'

I changed the name so I wouldn't get into trouble with the real pirates of Jeddore. I could already imagine the interviews; me telling reporters about my checkered past and my desire to pull my family out of poverty. Everyone always loved those sorts of stories. At home, it was the usual routine. Dad came home angry every night, sometimes drunk, cursing his boss and the clogged up toilets and his mop. Mom just floated through the days smoking and looking out

the window. I knew that once I told them my plans, they'd be happier. I'd start getting rich and we could move back to a normal house. I set to work in secret, crafting the first story. At first, I could only write a few hundred words an evening, but then the pages just kept flowing and flowing.

The first story began like this:

'Oh insouciant inhabitant of Mingsbight, little do you know what lurks beneath the sidewalks that you walk on. For down below, there is a race of children that the world forgot. But they will not be so easily forgotten. They toil in the shadows to uphold justice for the ordinary boys and girls who have no one to fight for their cause. First, their captain: A ruthless swashbuckler whose eye had been poked out in a knife fight. His name: McShane! And no finer pirate had ever trodden the tunnels and sewers that link every part of our fair city.'

I went on to tell the tale of Maggie Mallone, a damsel who walked the streets selling seafood. She would call out, 'snails and mussels, alive alive, oh.' All the pirate boys were in love with her, and she was the only one who could hope to mend their wild ways. But one day, the hapless lass was abducted by the rich boys from the north part of town. They thought they were the best people in the world because their fathers all had their own private gas lamps on their front yards. Who knows what they wanted from Maggie, but the Pirates of East Mingsbight vowed vengeance. There was a terrible battle on the fields of Abernathy, a park just outside of town. Both sides met in the early hues of dawn.

'Release the girl or DIE!' McShane shouted. The leader of the rich boys, Alfonsius McMyrtle, shouted back, 'We are the captains of this city now and forever and we do not have to answer to you. Maggie is ours, now!'

With that, the pirates quickly drew their swords and attacked. In the ensuing melee, Maggie was unfortunately slain. As her lifeblood ran out all over the sidewalk, she looked up at McShane and said, ‘I knew you would come for me. You were always the one...promise me you’ll always remain, alive alive...oh.’ And just like that, her spirit escaped up to heaven. That night, they buried poor Maggie on a lonely hill where the moon shines and the wolves howl. As they watched the moon rise over the pile of dirt, McShane sighed, ‘At least we all have each other.’ And they looked heavenward to the glistening stars above, knowing in their hearts that they would be true friends for eternity and beyond.

I have to admit that even I shed a small tear when I wrote those last words.

I knew that my parents probably weren’t the best judges of literature, so I decided my first move was to bring the story to Mrs. Colpus. At first, she only wanted to know why I hadn’t read the assigned books or written the book report I was supposed to write. I didn’t want to be insulting, but I figured there was no point in doing that stuff when I was already embarking on my journey as a professional author. I waited after school while she read the story. I told her that I was trying to go for the tone of Eliza Pike but with a more gritty, street kid feeling. She didn’t say much, but I knew she was impressed when she said that my parents should come in the next day to discuss my work.

My parents were sitting at the table having toast and tea for breakfast and looking through newspapers when I told them,

“Mom, dad...I have a little surprise for you. I made a decision about what I’m going to do. I’m going to write stories for the magazines.”

“You never go to school. How’s you going to be a writer?” Mom asked.

“I have been going to school. I mean it. I wrote something already and Mrs.Colpus wants you to come in to talk about it”

Dad looked up at this.

“What’s this about? In trouble again?”

“No, dad, really. I wrote story. Do you want to read it?”

He heaved a big suspicious sigh.

“Later. What time are we supposed to see the teacher?”

Him hesitating like that didn’t worry me too much. I knew I’d make them both proud once they read what I’d written. But the meeting at school didn’t go the way I thought it would. Mrs. Colpus just kept going on about how I should really just stick to the assigned readings that they were more than enough for me without me trying to do extracurricular writing, which, she made clear, she didn’t think was ready for publication. She even made some comment about my mom maybe taking me to see a doctor on account of what I’d written. When we got outside, dad gave one of his usual sighs,

“Business as usual. Another kick in the pants for the Coxwells. Why can’t you just be a normal kid?”

In a strange coincidence, Mrs. Colpus was found strangled to death behind the school a few weeks later. But I wasn’t going to school then and didn’t know anything about it.

I knew that artists are often not recognized right away and that it’s normal to have conflicts with your parents. So I wasn’t deterred by what my idiot teacher said. I actually took some money out of mom’s purse and went down to the post office. I folded up my story and sent it to the Tow Law Runner. I kept going on my walks and

thinking of more story ideas. I was beginning to think I'd written my address wrong on my letter, but then, one day, I got a little card in the mail saying they didn't have time to publish my story at the moment. That was disappointing, but they also said 'thank you for thinking of the Runner,' which I took as an open invitation to send more stories when the volume of submissions wasn't so high. But still, I couldn't help being a bit disappointed.

And then, one day, I was reading an Eliza story, and between advertisements for the 'Boy's Own Machine Gun' that shot real pellets and the 'Hercules Mighty Muscles Pills,' there was a notice. There was a picture of a man in a suit smoking a pipe and holding a big book in his hands. 'I've made best-selling authors out of hundreds of fellows just like you,' the man in the ad said. He went on to explain that he, Mr. William G. Sulliputty, could print your story in a beautiful leather binding. As many copies as you wanted, and with golden gilding for an extra fee. He explained that with the proper binding, you could just take your books to the bookstore and get them to sell the books for you and you'd split the profits. The path ahead was as bright as the sky above my head. I walked back home on a cloud. Past the booming factory and old geezer passed out in front of the pub. I was going to get out of here and become famous. When I got home, dad had his eyes closed and a beer in his hand. Mom told me to leave him be because he'd had another fight with his boss, our landlord.

But I knew I could cheer him up. I explained the whole thing to my parents and showed them the ad I'd cut out of the magazine. Dad looked at mom and I could see he was shaking a bit.

"I didn't sign up for this."

And that made mom really worried. She rushed over to him.

"Your father has enough trouble without this, Howie. You run along now, okay?"

“But what do you think? Can we do it”

“We have enough trouble putting food on the table without this nonsense.”

“But it says how you can cut out the middleman publishers and just sell the books yourself at the book shops.”

But dad started shouting.

“Howie! Didn’t you hear anything your teacher said? It’s crap, okay? Your stories are crap. And I don’t want to hear anything more about it. You want to be a famous writer? You’ll be lucky to get a job sweeping floors like your dad. You’re a freak, Howie. Don’t you get that?”

Mom just looked at me like a sheep. And for the first time, for just a flash. I hated them both. I felt myself starting to shake just like dad. And then the sentence that had been percolating deep down came bubbling up to the surface. I wished he was dead. I stormed out the door and into the evening light. and down the sidewalk, and down around the corner and right down into the barber’s chair. I was strapped in there and the barber’s face was all razor cuts and scraggly black beard and a sloppy toothless mouth. He was cutting my fingers off one knuckle at a time. They were falling with bloody little splats all over the floor.

“They’ll all have to come off, I’m afraid,” the barber said.

Quint crawled in on her hands and knees in a stained blue dress. She picked up my knuckles and stuffed them in her mouth. I couldn’t move.

“Quint! I want those back! Don’t eat them!”

But she just giggled through her full mouth and crawled back out. Finally, the barber was done and he unstrapped me.

“You’d better get going son, or you’ll be late, mind!”

So I ran out into the train station. There were whistles and people yelling and the trains on every track were just about to leave. Someone handed me my ticket, but I couldn't hold it...no fingers...so I ran up and down the tracks looking for my train. The blood still poured from my hands, but no one seemed to notice. And then, I slipped in a puddle of it and fell right into the tide. It was pushing me, washing me up against the rocks, slimy and slippery with green stuff. The sky was like iron and the sea was all blood. I scrambled to get up and slipped again, breaking my jaw on a rock. But I finally got out and there was Quint laughing at me in her awful blue dress.

“That’s what you get for sticking around there. Is mommy and daddy oh so happy to see you? Yeah? I told you so!” And she cackled horribly. I picked up a rock with what was left of my hands and threw it at her. She looked indignant.

“How could you?”

Something inside me welled up and exploded in a torrent of abuse. I shouted about how much I hated her and how I just wanted to be left alone, and I hoped one day that the doctors would find a way to cut her out of me for good. It was hard to yell through my broken jaw and spit and blood went flying out with my insults and rage. Quint just kept giggling at me. And then her giggle stopped when she saw a terrifying black dog. The hound. He growled and leaped on her. My heart felt lighter when the dog jumped to her face and scratched. She ran off and I ran after her, right down Blodger street a block from my house with all the shops on it. The spell seemed to be over, but I grabbed a stick that was there and just started smashing the windows of every shop. All up one side and down the other, and then I smashed every window on my street and our building too, until the policeman came and I almost swung at him, but he got the stick out of my hands. I was still screaming and mad.

Later, at the police station, Dad argued up and down that it wasn't his problem and that I should stay there in jail. But the police said because I was a minor I was his responsibility and all the windows were his responsibility, and he had to take me home because they couldn't leave me in an adult jail. So he dragged me out by my neck. But I couldn't even really see very well for the pounding in my chest and my hard breathing. My fingers were twitching and so was something above my eye. Outside our house, the neighbours were all watching the show. Some were sweeping up the glass. I gathered that dad had gotten fired again on account of me. And he didn't even say anything to me. He just dragged me along like I was a giant boat anchor. Until I broke free and ran off as fast as I could, right down into the caves under the city. And this was the only double spell I'd ever had. But this time, it didn't feel like a spell. It was a dark cold tunnel. Not man made. But I just ran along blind. I saw the back of some horrible creature lumbering along. Later, I realized I recognized it from the pictures of the thing that came up through the sinkhole on the outskirts of town a few years ago. But at the time, I just ran screaming and scraping my fists along and rock walls until they were all bloody pulp. And I ran back in the night up our street and no one was there until I got to our house, where dad was standing there, tottering and drunk with a whisky bottle. There was a small suitcase at his feet.

"Your clothes. You're out of here. I don't want to see you again."

I pretended it's what I wanted too.

"Fine. But I want my Eliza Pike magazines."

He guffawed.

"Your magazines? They're not yours. You didn't pay for them. Just take your bag and get the hell out of my sight."

And he picked up the suitcase and threw it down at me. I felt the black seething rage come up. I felt like it was big enough and black enough to stretch out across the sky and blot out the stars and steal the breath right out of his fucking mouth. And there it was. The remembrance I'd pushed down until this very moment. The hound was on him. Ripping and biting. I stood there watching. I saw my father's eyes looking into mine. Hurt, shocked and sad. They were my eyes. The eyes I'd looked into since I'd been born. And for the rest of my life, I'll never know what he was thinking.

18. Fish and Chips, Part Two

The memory of my father's death flew through my mind after being buried since it happened. But I didn't have any time to think about that right now. It was the magician. He was stabbing Granard! This time, I didn't freeze. I leaped forward to push the thing away. In the process I sort of tripped on the mop that had fallen in front of me, but still managed to give the magician a shove. He'd stabbed Granard once, but I stopped the second jab. Granard just stood there with this confused look as the colour drained from his face, clutching at his side. The magician recovered from my shove and turned laughing at us.

"The milkman found some courage! Just in time to save the fish and chips man!"

He kept laughing, and growing bigger and taller, his features distorting and bubbling. I grabbed Granard and shouted.

"Run!"

He clued in just enough to follow me down the corridor. There was still some evening light coming in through little slits above our heads. We ran a ways and I didn't really know if the magician was after us. There were doors here and there. I picked one and we went in. I closed the door and just stayed as quiet as we could. I didn't hear anything. Granard was breathing hard and didn't have any idea what was going on. His side was bleeding a lot. But he didn't actually seem to be all that badly hurt, really.

“What was that?” He whispered at me.

“It’s something...from underground.”

“But he’s just a man, not a huge monster from the sink holes.”

“There’s all sorts of things down there.”

He looked right at me.

“How do you know?”

“Well,” I thought quickly, “father Wheelan told me.”

“What do we do now?”

“I guess we just wait and try to hear if he’s coming. And if we don’t hear anything, we just sneak back out?”

“Okay.”

I looked around the room in the fading light. It was full of electrical stuff. There were some boxes on a shelf. The label said ‘vacuum tubes!’ This was Exciting! I grabbed one and looked inside and they definitely looked like they would fit the old army radio in Mr. Greenwood’s yard. There’s a touch of grey in every silver lining, I thought to myself. And it will all be worth it if I can get the thing working! So we just stayed there a while listening at the door. But we didn’t hear anything. The sun had set and it was nearly pitch black in the room now. Granard had his ear pressed up against the wall. He was really scared. More than me. But I guess by now I’d seen a lot of pretty scary stuff.

“Should we try to get out?” he whispered.

“Okay, I said.”

He slowly opened the door, which of course creaked like crazy. We crept out into the corridor, and like I said, it was almost impossible to see anything by now, since it was night. Luckily, we didn’t have too

far to go, so we tiptoed along, partly feeling our way. But everything seems to take longer in the dark. Then Granard stopped,

“What was that?”

I thought I heard some muffled laughter too.

“It sounded far away...just keep going,” I said.

So we kept going, until Granard stopped again.

“Now what is it?”

I could hear the alarm in his voice,

“It stopped,”

Then I felt it too. The corridor ended in what felt like a pile of rubble.

“I think the wall’s caved in. We went the wrong way!”

Then we heard the laughing again. Closer.

“Did we miss a turn?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “we just have to go back and check.”

So back we crept in the dark.

“Was it this way?” he asked.

There was a turn off we must have missed.

“Maybe, but I don’t remember turning to get to the electrics room”

He took a few steps, then came running back and there was a horrible scurrying sound.

He grabbed me and we both ran through the bunker.

The scurrying stopped.

“It was just rats, I think”

Granard started sucking in his breath really hard.

“My god, my god, my god. I can’t breathe.”

He was making me really nervous. More nervous than I already was.

“Granard! It was just some rats. We have to just keep going. The way out has to be around here somewhere.”

So we kept feeling our way along, barely able to see anything. I had the distinct feeling that we were going on a downward slant. The walls started feeling wet and there was some dripping. I still had my box of tubes. But from his breathing, I could tell Granard was still petrified, so I didn’t say anything that would make him freak out again. Then the floor started to get wet. There weren’t any side doors anymore and our feet were getting soaked. And it was getting cold. And once again, Granard stopped walking.

“My god, my god...we’re going to die down here...I’m still bleeding...I want to go home.”

Maybe he was right about us dying down here, but it was still really irritating to have to keep trying to calm the man down. Especially since he’d been chasing me with a knife just a little while ago.

“Granard, this tunnel’s got to lead somewhere. Just keep going. Do you still have that knife?”

“I musta dropped it somewhere.”

Totally useless. I was starting to shiver from the cold and the wet and I thought if I found another turn off, I might just run off and leave Granard to his own devices. He was really getting on my nerves. But after what seemed like a really long time and us not finding anything except this long straight corridor, the ground

started inclining upwards again and we came to a big metal door. It wasn't the one we came in through.

"Oh, thank the Lord," Granard exclaimed.

We both pushed against the door and eventually it came loose and opened. The outside air came rushing in. And there we were. Still on the coast, but not anywhere I'd ever been before. There was a sparse kind of woods and the waves crashing. The horizon out over the water was turning red, so it must have been getting on towards dawn. But there was no road. No path. Nothing to show us which way to go. We didn't say much since there wasn't much to say. The only thing to do was to make our way along the coast and hope that we'd find something eventually. I was going to be in big trouble if I missed work because of this, and I didn't see any way I was not going to be missing work. I figured I'd just blame Granard since this was really all his fault.

"You know, Granard, you're going to have to explain to my boss why I didn't make it to work this morning."

He seemed to be shocked by this.

"I have to?? You're the one who poisoned my food! It could have killed someone! That's my livelihood."

"Following me out here and chasing me with a knife seems like a bit of an overreaction, don't you think? It was nothing personal, you know."

"Well then what the hell was it?"

I held my chin up a bit so I would seem more grave.

"It's a matter of national security. I really can't tell you anything."

"You're off your rocker, buddy."

"Am I? And who saved you from getting stabbed down there?"

That's right: the guy you were there to stab yourself! Talk about putting the cart before the horse!"

"Alright, forget it. Let's just figure out how to get out of here and we won't say another word about it."

"Fine with me."

Slowly but surely, the sun rose and we warmed up a bit. And then we saw some kind of human habitation up ahead. We smelled it, really, before we saw it. Fire and cooking. Then later, tobacco smoke. We kept picking our way over the rocks and through the trees along the coast until we saw a big dock. It was sort of mossy and broken looking and there was just one rowboat tied up there. There was a small collection of houses behind the dock with some smoke rising from a couple of the chimneys. And on the dock were three old men in worn out old fishermen's overcoats. Two of them were smoking pipes. Granard started waving his arms like an idiot.

"Hallo there! Hallo! We need help!"

And he ran to the dock. I walked behind. The three old men turned slowly to face us. No surprise registered on their faces. In fact, nothing at all registered on their faces. Granard tried to explain everything to them.

"We got lost in a bunker...we've been walking all night...I'm injured and need a doctor."

"Bunker?" One of the old guys said.

"Yes, it goes all along the coast here."

"No, I don't think so," and the old guy pulled on his pipe, "no bunker around here."

I decided to try.

"Where are we? We need to get back to St. Gaff's."

“St. Gaff’s!” The three geezers looked at each other and chuckled.

“Where are we?”

One gave me a long look.

“The village Aftagley”

“Aftagley?” Granard said, “I’ve lived on this island my whole life and I’ve never heard of it.”

They just shrugged and kept watching us with a sort of vacant and mildly amused look.

“Can someone at least drive us back down the coast to where our trucks are?”

“No roads up that way.”

At this point, a stocky man, maybe in his 50s, with a stripey sweater and a sailor’s hat appeared on the dock. He went right to the boat.

“Morning fellows,” he said. “Found some new friends, I see?”

“Lost, they say. Just stumbled out of the woods, they say. Wanting to go to St. Gaff’s to find their truck.”

“No, our trucks are down the coast. We got lost in a bunker last night and just came out a door up that way.”

And Granard pointed. The sailor screwed up his face,

“Bunker?”

“That’s what we told them, Jay. We never heard neither heads nor tales about any bunker. But they won’t leave it alone. Will they fellows?”

They chuckled at us.

“No, they don’t seem inclined to drop it at all.”

I piped up.

“Maybe you could take us down the coast in your boat? To where our trucks are?”

“Now there’s an idea. He’s a bright one, he is,” one codger said, clicking his teeth on his pipe.

Jay the fisherman gave a us a big smile.

“Why sure,” he said, “sure, why not?”

He got in the boat and motioned for us to hop in. We walked over. The boat was half-rotten. In the bottom were some ropes and a big club.

“What’s the club for?” I asked.

“Bashing the fish. Ain’t you never gone fishing, lad? Ahh...one moment. I almost forgot.”

Then Jay the sailor hopped out and picked up a couple of cement building blocks I hadn’t noticed sitting on the dock. He set them down close to the boat, got in himself, then pulled the blocks into the boat as well.

“Ballast,” he said and winked at us, “You boys getting in?”

Granard and I looked at each other.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” I said, “we’ll take the road instead.”

“Suit yourself!” Jay said.

And he just sat there watching us. And not going out to sea at all, even though he was supposed to be out fishing.

Then Granard turned to me,

“Let’s get out of here. Find someone else. These old boys are daft.”

“No kidding,” I said.

So we walked off the dock and into the village. The old guys turned and watched us go, chuckling to themselves. Then one called after us,

“I’m telling you boys, you won’t find but the one road out of town and it most assuredly won’t take you to any trucks.”

“There’s got to be someone sane here somewhere,” Granard said.

“Look,” I said and pointed, “an Inn. Maybe they can make us some breakfast.”

“And give us some bandages.”

We went in and there was a young buxom woman behind the bar. She looked pretty surprised to see us.

“Morning, lass. Could you bring us some breakfast, please? And bandages?” Granard said.

She smiled,

“Most certainly! Bacon and eggs and toast okay?”

“Perfect!”

We sat down in the little dining room with white wallpaper. A bit peely, but pretty cheerful after the night we’d had. I think we both could have fallen asleep right there we were so tired. The girl came back with some bandages. Granard took them and went to the bathroom to patch himself up. I sat there staring out the window. Nothing was moving outside and the only sound was the girl humming to herself from somewhere. There weren’t any other

customers there. Then Granard came back and I was glad to see him.

“What do you think?” I asked, “do you think we’ll have to walk all the way back to St. Gaff’s?”

“I don’t know. Someone around here’s got to have a car. We’ll offer to pay them something.”

The girl brought in some tea.

“Milk?” Granard asked.

“Not fresh. We’ve only got condensed.”

“That’ll do,” Granard said.

She brought in a can and punched a hole in the top.

“So where you boys coming from?” She asked as Granard poured milk from the can into his tea.

About this time one of the old guys from the dock came in and sat at the bar.

“Brandy!” he said.

“Be there in a minute.”

“You were saying?” She asked.

Granard answered,

“We were...driving...when we got lost in a bunker...we walked all night and came out just above this place.”

“Bunker? What’s that?”

“Like a buried trench that soldiers use. Fortifications?”

The old guy turned around at this point.

“Ah, the fortifications! Yes, indeed. I’d strongly recommend

against wandering around those at night. Been known to collapse at points. Haven't been used in a generation."

Granard perked up at this.

"So you know it! Can you get us to the other end?"

"Tut tut...no, lad. The only road out goes to St. Gaff's."

"And can someone drive us there? We can pay."

"No, no...no one here's got a motorcar...no horses either. A delivery truck comes once a week to deliver supplies and pick up—"

The girl gave him a sharp look and cut him off.

"I've got to be checking on the breakfast!" And she walked off.

Another of the old guys came in. The first told the other that we were lost in the fortifications and needed to get to St. Gaff's. Then they whispered to each other a bit.

"Well, you boys are in luck. The delivery truck's coming into town tomorrow."

I got pretty nervous about this.

"Tomorrow? I'm going to miss two days of work? We've got to get out of here! How long a walk is it?"

They old guys chuckled.

"About two or three days, maybe? Why don't you fellows just rent a room upstairs. Take it easy, and you'll be home tomorrow afternoon."

By this time food had arrived, and it smelled so good, the idea of taking a forced mini vacation didn't seem so bad after all. So we ate. With these two guys watching us. It was making me uncomfortable, so I decided to say something.

"So are you guys fishermen?"

They nodded.

“Oh yes...fishermen. Mostly we’re all retired around here. Some were in the service.”

Then they just looked at us for an awkwardly long moment.

“So, how many people live here?”

They looked at each other. I guessed they were trying to count up in their heads. The waitress sat on a stool nearby watching all of this.

“It’s hard to say, really lad. It’s just a small village, you know.”

Then Granard piped up,

“But if it’s small, shouldn’t it be easier — “

But they cut him off.

“And what exactly were you doing driving two trucks around this part of the island?”

Now it was our turn to look nervously at each other.

“We got lost. We were looking for a radio shed that someone told us about, but we couldn’t find it,” I said.

The two old guys looked at each other.

“Radio shed? I don’t think there’s anything like that around these parts.”

There was another odd silence. Then one of them asked me,

“And what’s your name, son?”

“Howie.”

“Howie is it! I knew a sergeant Howie, once. Any relation?”

“I don’t think so. Howie’s my first name.”

They looked at each other again.

We were done eating and I was really tired of everyone looking at everyone suspiciously, so I stood up.

“Can we go to our room? I’m so tired!” And I yawned.

The girl got up,

“Oh, I’ll have to get it ready. No one’s been here for a long time, you see.”

“Well, I’m going for a walk, then. You want to come, Granard?”

“No, I’m good here,” he said, feeling the bandages under his shirt.

So out I went. There was a cool breeze coming off the water, but like I said. Nothing was stirring. I started walking along what turned out to be the only street in town. But I didn’t get too far before I noticed the old guys from the inn were following a ways back. I turned around, and one touched his head as if to say, ‘hello there.’ It was a bit odd, but I kept going. There were maybe two dozen houses. A little store. You could really tell that the place was full of retired people because the windows were all dusty and a lot of the boards on the houses were faded and cracking. One house didn’t even have a door and there was a rusty bathtub in the front yard of another. It didn’t even have any flowers in it. There was an old fashioned wagon full of shiny milk canisters like the ones we used. But like the man said, there were no horses around. The trees were all pretty overgrown.

There were some wagon trails that led off into the woods, but I just kept to the main road. It was just gravel. Out past where all the houses were, the undergrowth got thicker and mosquitoes and flies started buzzing all around me, so I turned back. The old guys weren’t following me anymore. Then, from one of the wagon trails,

two men in their 30s or so appeared. They were all sweaty with their sleeves rolled up. They were talking to each other, but as soon as they saw me, they froze and stared. Then one smiled.

“Hey! You lost?”

“No, just staying at the inn for the night, then heading back to town.”

He gave me a kind of salute. And then he and his buddy disappeared down the track again. So I guessed there were some non-retired people here too. Back down at the dock, Granard was standing and looking out to sea. Jay, the guy with the boat, was gone.

“This place is very strange,” Granard said, “I’ll be glad to see the back of it.”

“What was that?”

We both heard something that sounded like a moo somewhere in the woods.

“Who knows, “ I said, “I think I’m going to go have a lie down.”

He was tired too, so we went back to the inn and the girl showed us our room. The windows were open to air the place out. Two single beds. Bathroom down the hall. Granard locked the door. I pulled the sheets back and got in in my uniform. The sheets were kind of stiff and smelled a bit musty. But I was asleep before I even had time to really notice.

“What was that?!”

I was startled awake. It was Granard. He was in his underwear. I guess he’d taken his clothes off to go to bed. He was listening at the door. It was evening now and he must have closed the windows. But Granard was right. There was a lot of shuffling and whispering on the other side of the door. Out the window, I couldn’t see

anything. A few lights in a few houses.

“What do you think’s going on?” I asked.

“I don’t know!”

Then...the doorknob turned. The door was still locked. And whoever was on the other side started jiggling the doorknob more.

“What do we do?”

“I don’t know!”

Then from the other side of the door we heard,

“Go get the key!”

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I said to Granard.

I opened the window. There was an awning below. Granard was putting his pants on when we heard the key sliding into the lock. I jumped out and landed on the awning with a thud. I didn’t actually hurt as much as I thought it would.

“Granard! Come on!”

I guess he gave up on the pants because he jumped out the window without them. We looked up and the waitress, the old guys and some other men we hadn’t seen before were all crowding in the window to look for us. I jumped down to the street and rolled in the gravel a bit. Granard was hesitating, but I could see that all the weirdos had left our room and were probably coming downstairs for us.

“Come on!” I shouted and started running up the main road.

I heard Granard fall to the ground and then he was running too. I looked back to let him catch up. And the townsfolk were indeed coming after us. Around a curve in the road, Granard shouted,

“Down there” pointing to one of the wagon tracks that went off

the main road.

We ran down there, through the woods. It was dark. After a while, we stopped, panting.

“I don’t hear them,” I said.

“What in the hell is going on here?”

“I don’t know. They’re probably not used to visitors”

“I think they meant us some real harm”

“No kidding. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“How? Where’re we going to go?”

“Go back? Maybe they’re still out looking for us. We could grab the boat,” I suggested.

“What if they’re waiting for us? This track must lead somewhere. Let’s keep going.”

So we kept going for a while and it turned out that he was right. The track ended at a gate and the woods opened onto a field. It was odd because the field had been cleared in the middle of the woods. And not too long ago either, I didn’t think. Some of the tree stumps looked not so old.

“Come on, maybe there’s a farmhouse,” Granard said.

I didn’t think so, but we both hopped over. We made our way across the field. I couldn’t see any houses or anything. But then I stepped on a branch. It made a loud sound and we both froze, sensing that something was wrong. Then, there was grunting. We’d woken something up. It was kind of behind us. We turned. There was a red glow. And we just stood there, unable to believe our eyes. Three young, glowing red cows. They were walking towards us, slowly. Then they flared their nostrils. One bore its teeth. They were sharp

instead of not sharp. Then they charged after us. We both ran. We couldn't go back the way we came, so we ran forward, getting separated. I scrambled over the fence before a cow could get me. The cow stopped at the fence. I walked along the perimeter and eventually found Granard. He was still catching his breath. The cows seemed to have calmed down, so we went back around to the path we'd arrived on. And then we saw a sign we'd missed coming in: 'Keep Out: Experimental Farm.'

We didn't say much. But we couldn't do anything but go back the way we'd come as quietly as possible. I heard Granard's teeth chattering. He was all sweaty in his underpants and undershirt and now I guessed he was getting cold. When we got close to the village, we just went through the woods as carefully as we could. We didn't see or hear anyone. We got down to the dock. The boat was tied up there. We waited, but it really seemed like the coast was clear. So we snuck onto the dock, untied the boat and rowed out as quietly as we could. Then there were torches all through the town. A voice rang out.

"There!" It was the waitress.

She ran out onto the dock. The townsfolk followed. But They just stood there in silence watching us row away. We took turns rowing. I was tired and starving. Granard was freezing. I don't think we really knew what to say to each other, so we didn't say much of anything. When dawn started poking her fingers through the clouds on the horizon, we could make out the bunker where the trucks were. We put the boat ashore. And with nary a word, we hopped into our trucks and started back fo St. Gaff's.

For me, the drive was a sad one. As we drove by the radio station, I realized, with sharp pangs of regret, that I must have left the box of vacuum tubes behind somewhere. I was returning from this perilous misadventure completely and totally empty handed. When we did get

back to town, Granard went his way, in his underpants, and I went mine. I got to the Billings Memorial Milk Station. Late. I just went to Corwin's office and decided to tell him exactly what had happened. I was pretty nervous, but it was, after all, his idea to blame Granard's fish. It wasn't a bad idea, of course, but it didn't really turn out the way we'd thought it would. Corwin told me to get to my route and that we'd talk about all this another time.

The rest of the week went by as usual. Travis was still looking out to sea with his spyglass. Mrs. Noseworthy was still harrumphing about everything. And Wheelan still wanted his fish sandwiches. I went to Granard's shop as usual. We made a bit of small talk but didn't mention what had happened. The health inspector had come to St. Gaff's and Beaver spoke with him. I also saw Beaver talking to Granard. Maybe that's why Granard never spoke about those red cows or the town of Aftagley to anyone. But still, it seemed like there was a bond between us now. And then, one day after work, Corwin pulled up in a truck while I was walking home.

"Howie. Get in. We need to talk."

19. Subversion

I was in the middle of my rounds when I took short break to really think about where I was. It was a beautiful day just on the edge of summer. A clear blue sky with puffy white clouds here and there. A nice salty breeze wafted across the whole town. I looked up at a flock of birds and I used my imagination to imagine what the town would look like to a bird swooping down from the clouds. First he'd see the tower of the bluish green church that would look a bit like a whale from the air. He'd hover over the downtown, with the police station and the nice hotel, the liquor store. He'd see the people on the hotel rooftop having fancy drinks. He'd dip his wing at the freshly shaved men sauntering out of Mel's barber shop. He'd take a deep sniff of the smells coming from Granard's fish stand. He'd float over the hills of the town, all the pastel blue and red houses with their neat and tidy little lawns and gardens, then he'd fly by the giant ship they were building, and he'd hear all the workmen hammering away happily in perfect rhythm. Up and down the pier. He'd smile at all the seagulls there. He's stop at Lapham square and have a nice long drink from the fountain. He'd pass the filling station on the edge of town with the crotchety old Mr. Neumann fumbling with the pump. And then he'd climb high as he traversed along the shore, past the fisherman's house where Travis was performing some weird religious ceremony and Naomi was staring out her window at the sea. I felt really lucky to be a part of this little community. More and more, I felt like this could be home.

I was just about finished relieving myself on Mrs. Noseworthy's flowers when the old bat came running out her front door.

"What in God's name are you doing?"

"I had to go somewhere. It's the same as watering them, right?"

"You filthy animal! Get out of there!"

I jumped out of the garden as she was trying to grab me.

"Sometimes these things can't be helped! You should really have more respect for those of us in there service, Mrs."

"In the service? If my son were here he'd have your hide for saying that."

She was always going on and on about her son who was a corporal in the war. I decided the best way to handle her was to stay calm and professional. We were both out on the sidewalk now.

"If you're dissatisfied with my performance, you can go down and lodge a formal complaint at the station. Just go in the front door and Beaver should be there. You can talk to him."

A worried look flashed across her face for a second. Then she clenched her jaw. By this time Mr. Noseworthy had come out too.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing," she said.

Then she shook her finger in my face.

"I know what you people are up to. You milkmen don't scare me," she said.

I really didn't know what she meant, but she and her husband went back inside, and I got back in my truck. I couldn't afford to waste any more time. As I continued my deliveries, my mind drifted

back to my conversation with Corwin a couple of days before when he picked me up in the milk truck.

I hopped in on the passenger side. I'd never seen Corwin driving and I didn't know if I was in some kind of trouble or if he had some good news for me. We drove a couple of miles to the tall sheer cliffs a couple of miles north of town. That's the opposite direction from Travis' house. There are some benches there and I followed Corwin to one and we both sat down. He still hadn't said anything. But then he did.

"I wanted to have a chat with you away from the other milkmen, Howie. I know you've seen...things...and that you might be confused. I know you were in Aftagley and you might have seen the experimental farms. It goes without saying that you will not speak about these things to anyone. I've watched you work, Howie. And what I see is a young man who was born good, with tremendous potential. But he was born into hard circumstances. Probably to parents who either didn't have the time or the ability to see that goodness or that potential.

"You probably had some hard knocks as a child. And over time, all that was good in you was covered over with the detritus of the world. And you felt as though you were alone. That no one really understood you or what you were going through. I think you felt lost. But something drew you to us. Something you may not even be able to articulate brought you to join the milkmen. I can tell you, Howie, that it was no accident. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you had an inkling that the milkmen had something you were looking for. You already know that being a milkman isn't just a job. It's a calling. And I firmly believe that you felt that call, Howie. There is of course the camaraderie, the knowledge that you're doing important work for the community. But the milkmen are more than that. We are a fraternal order. An ancient fraternal order of men just like you. Many milkmen remain milkmen all their lives. They do

good, important work. They support their families. And that is noble and good. But for those who have the desire and the capacity to make more of themselves, we offer a path forward. How far you travel on that path is up to you. I'd like you to consider this conversation as a formal invitation to become an initiate in our rite. The Department of Lactic Affairs is a repository of the most ancient wisdom known to man. Our founder, in more modern times, has found a way to harness that wisdom by using the techniques of modern science to uncover the true natural laws of the universe.

"The central goal of mankind, I think you'd agree, is survival and prosperity. These are things that all men want. In order to achieve them, man must know how to manipulate and organize his environment to suit his needs. The way to health, sanity and success lies through correct principles of organization and administration. These principles can only be learned through years of study. Moreover, this knowledge cannot be made available to the uninitiated. As milkmen. As men with real knowledge and know-how, we have a responsibility to step in and help out where knowledge is lacking.

"The purveyors of chaos abound, Howie. Even here in St. Gaff's. You've had dealings with the police. With inspector Piercey. Do you really think we can leave the safety and stability of this island to him and his goons? If they had any competence at all, they'd be off fighting on the front lines. The government in Mingsbight is a pack of fraudulent lawyers who look out only for themselves. So we really have no choice but to take matters into our own hands. Howie. I believe that you have a gift. One that no one has yet understood. One that can be very helpful to our mission here. That is why I pushed you, perhaps prematurely, to venture alone underground. But I also firmly believe that once you've taken your first steps, and once you begin to understand, you will be able to return and complete your task.

“I have a book I’d like you to study. This is the first step on your journey. If you are successful, you will attain the rank of Entitled Apprentice. Again. You will never mention any of this to anyone except those who are also initiates. For now, on St. Gaff’s, that means me, Frank, Beaver and Walker. We milkmen alone know what lurks in the dark heart of this earth, Howie. But it is not given to just anyone to delve into that dark heart and pluck out the jewels that lie buried there.”

At this point, he took out a small book, maybe 50 or sixty pages. It was worn and old looking.

“Read this Howie. Read it carefully. I’ll be asking you about it shortly. I must also tell you, Howie, that I was sent here with a clear set of goals. Time is beginning to run out. If the thermolizer isn’t up and running in the next eight weeks, there will be budgetary cutbacks. We won’t be able to justify the manpower we have here. We need the milk of Mamifa and we need it very soon. Did you know, Howie, that there’s a section of milkmen working at the front? Delivering cream to officers in the trenches. I shudder to think about what life would be like in the trenches. Don’t you, Howie?”

It was quite a conversation, and it took a while for everything to sink in. But today, everything was going great. I was feeling really lucky that I didn’t have to be a milkman on the front and that I had someone like Corwin looking out for me. After my deliveries I went back to the milk station. Inside, Beaver was eating a fish sandwich. Granard’s place had become a lot more popular after everything that had happened. And now Beaver was positively addicted. I dropped off my daily report and walked over to Stormy’s place. She’d been in a good mood because her math teacher, Mr. Jenkins, gave her an A in math, even though she missed her exam. He said her term work was strong enough that she didn’t even need to take the exam. So now she was looking for a summer job and we were planning for our future.

On my way in, I stared with longing at the radio in the front yard, remembering with sadness the vacuum tubes I'd lost. But Stormy and I sat on a bench in the backyard. Sitting as close to each other as we could. We held hands and talked about this and that. She was warm against me, and I moved our hands onto her leg.

"I bet you could work with Granard. We're on pretty good terms and I bet I could get you in there."

"I'm not working with food. It's disgusting. I'll spend all my time washing pots."

"Everyone has to start somewhere. And it wouldn't be forever."

"Why can't you just ask Corwin to transfer you to Mingsbight? I promised myself when I got out of high school, I'd get off this island."

"They need me here for an important mission that I can't talk about. I told you already! And anyways, aren't you worried about leaving your dad here?"

"My dad keeps talking about going to Elkhorn. He's sick of this place too. And what kind of mission do they need you for?"

I acted like I was annoyed, and twisted a bit to face her, but really it was my subtle attempt to move my hand higher up her thigh.

"What does that mean? Believe it or not, they need me to do things that no one else can do. They can't get the thermolizer to work properly without me because they need a special ingredient that only I can get. I can't tell you any more except that it has to do with top secret cow farms and it's actually a classified military operation and I actually have to meet with a group of generals next week. So for now moving to..."

My hand was making good progress and was almost in her lap, But then her dad appeared with some biscuits and, in a flash, she threw my sweaty hand away, dashing all my hopes.

“Hi Howie. I couldn’t help but overhear. Did you say something about the thermolizer? And a secret cow farm?”

“Oh, I was just joking around, Mr. Greenwood. We were actually talking about a story in the Tow Law Runner.”

“I knew something strange was going on down there,” Mr. Greenwood said, almost to himself.

“No, really it was a joke. As if a bunch of generals would meet with me! And I could get in a lot of trouble, okay?”

“Don’t you worry, Howie, mum’s the word.” But he had this grim, determined look on his face that made me nervous.

“Dad. Howie was really just kidding. He just doesn’t want to take me to Mingsbight.”

“Oh, of course, of course,” he muttered without conviction, walking away.

Stormy and I went back to talking about other things. Gossip about her classmates. I didn’t really know the people she was talking about, so I sort of tuned out and just watched how beautiful she was, with her black hair flicking back and forth, the little lines on the side of her mouth when she smiled and her red lips that were red as raspberries. Before I left, we kissed. My arms were around her waist and my belly was full of butterflies.

Walking down the sidewalk, I kept remembering how her tongue felt against mine and I figured maybe she was right. Maybe after this mission and after the thermolizer was working, I could ask to go back to Mingsbight. Maybe I’d introduce Stormy to my mother, and we’d be a happy family. After the war we could go visit Mr. Greenwood in Elkhorn. I’d always heard about Elkhorn’s giant gates and all the futuristic machines they had in there. The Engineer’s Utopia, they called it. Or maybe Mr. Greenwood and my mother would hit it off and we’d have a big cheerful family together.

I picked up some dinner and the latest copy of the Tow Law Runner on my way home. Back at my building, I opened the door, walked into the little lobby, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. A small red ball bounced slowly down the steps. I picked it up and looked at it. Definitely rubber, I thought to myself. Then a small boy, maybe eight or nine came running down the stairs. I'd never seen him before.

"Hey! That's my ball"

I threw it to him and he almost caught it.

"Here you go champ."

"I just moved in with my mom."

"It's good to have new neighbours."

I started up the stairs and he followed.

"My name's Mack. My daddy's in jail."

"Oh! What did he do?"

"He stole a loaf of bread so that me and my mom wouldn't starve to death. But they caught him and put him in jail."

"That's really terrible. I'm friends with the baker here, so if you ever need a loaf of bread, just ask. I'm Howie."

It turned out that we both lived on the same floor. When we got there, Mack threw the ball and it bounced off the smelly carpet, then the wall, then back him.

"My mom got a job working on that big ship outside."

"Good for her. That's hard work over there."

"My daddy's deaf in one ear. So he couldn't join the army."

"Maybe that's why the police caught him? He couldn't hear them coming."

“Maybe. My daddy can run fast, so probably he just didn’t hear them coming.”

It was my duty, I felt, to pass on some wisdom to the younger generation. So just before going in, I said,

“Listen Mack. See that door there? Don’t ever bounce your ball on that door. And don’t knock on that door either. There’s an old woman who lives in there and she’s got big stick with old ribbons and trash tied to it. There’s no telling what she’ll do if you disturb her. Okay?”

“Is she a witch?”

“No, I don’t think so. She’s nice once you get to know her. But if you startle her, she might get upset.”

“Okay, mister, thanks.”

I went in and sat down. I opened the window and the wonderful sea air came blowing in. Work was done for the day over at the shipyard. I liked to just look at the ship and imagine all the places it would go and all the people it might kill in some huge naval battle. Maybe it would sink to the bottom and thousands of fish would live in it. It was almost finished and I couldn’t wait to see them launch it out to sea.

I warmed up some beans and a sausage while I was thinking about the ship. And the sea air mixed with the sausage smell made me feel like everything was right with the world. I felt more energetic and at ease than I had in quite a long time. I was going places and doing things. While I ate, I opened up the little book Corwin had given me to the first page.

‘If you wish to make your plans become a reality there are several steps you must first take. Your first job is to make an investigation into the basic parts of the business, the group or

government you wish to organize. Take a large sheet of paper and jot down the names of all the pieces of equipment you will need to get the job done. Remember. When the knowledge of how a group or business was first organized is lost, it will be very difficult to regain that knowledge. The whole organization will be in danger of collapse. The new people may have only a vague understanding of all the mechanics involved, and so may inadvertently destroy what they're supposed to oversee. This is why you must keep a sharp focus on your plans. Get a really clear image of them in your mind. And also, when a competent administrator is already in place, you must respect his wishes at all times. This is the key to personal advancement. These are some of the topics we will be covering in much greater depth over the course of this pamphlet.'

I was getting pretty sleepy after reading a bit. Maybe I was more tired than I thought I was and while I was reading I kept wondering about the new episode of Eliza Pike. I had the new issue and I was supposed to read it with Stormy. But I figured it would be okay if I read the first couple of pages on my own as a reward for working on my Entitled Apprentice degree.

The story was a real page turner. Eliza was facing her most terrible archenemy: Matilda Moonrose. Matilda drank whiskey and smoked big cigars just like a man and she was always belting out these big belly laughs. In this episode, she'd stolen a school bus filled with school kids and wouldn't tell anyone where she'd taken them. After pursuing every avenue and examining every clue, Eliza was, for the very first time, stumped. So she went down to the whiskey bar she knew Matilda liked to cavort around in. She opened the door, saw Matilda and shouted, 'Your hooliganism is at an end, Matilda Moonrose!' But Matilda threw a bar stool at Eliza and a bar fight broke out in the bar. Chairs got busted across people's backs. Broken bottles were smashed into people's faces. The bartender got his shotgun from under the bar and shot a couple of people. But the

fighting was so intense, no one even noticed. In the end, Matilda escaped, leaving only a handkerchief with the letters D.U. Stitched onto it. The episode ended with Eliza on the roof of the bar looking out over the city skyline and looking at the handkerchief and vowing to rescue the children and to bring Matilda to justice. Wow. The story was getting very intense.

I looked back at the book Corwin had given me: 'The Correct Principles of Administration by R.F. Boswell, GMDOLA.' I decided I needed more of a break before plunging into the book again. And it was a nice evening, so I went out for a walk.

The sun was down and with the warm sea air and the darkness, I felt free. I walked along the pier. Past the spot where they'd dropped Pyman in the water. My mind wandered back to what I'd remembered about my dad. I'd always blamed myself for what happened, but now I knew it wasn't exactly my fault. And that made me realize that I probably wasn't responsible for what happened to Billings either. With these revelations a lot of weight lifted off my back. It was like a wise man said once; a clear conscience is like being on vacation all the time. I ended up walking for quite a long time. All through the sleeping town. I was making peace with the past and a bright future seemed to be right in front of my face. I went home and fell into a deep dreamless sleep, with the sound of the banging next door receding into the dark folds of my sleepy brain.

The next day I got up late, groggy from staying up so late and sleeping to heavily. I heard the clock far down the pier strike ten. It was Sunday and I didn't have to work. So I threw on my civies and headed downstairs. My plan was to go grab a sweet bun and tea at the bakers. But when I got outside, I was really alarmed. There was blood all over the steps. I looked up and there was blood smeared all over the wall of the building across the road. Then I heard a scream. Down the block, a

kid was laughing hysterically and chasing a teenaged girl with a bloody knife in his hand. I thought maybe I was dreaming. I walked on. More blood splatters. A man walked by me quite calmly with blood stains all over his back. I was about to ask if he was okay, but then I remembered and gave up any hope of a breakfast bun.

I made my way to church, joining a throng of bloody parishioners. Kids and teens alike were running in and out of the crowd with knives and axes, striking random people and laughing. One kid even ran up to me with a wooden gun. He squeezed a rubber squeeze bulb and sprayed me with sticky red liquid. I didn't mind, of course. Inside the church, I managed to find a spot on the last pew where Travis and Naomi usually sat. But they weren't there today. It was surprising because this was the fullest I'd ever seen the place. It was standing room only, and pretty much everyone in the place was soaked in blood. Stormy was sitting with some friends a few rows up, but I didn't see Mr. Greenwood. Then Wheelan came out with flowing red robes. He looked really pleased. Everyone quieted down and he began.

"Welcome friends, and happy Whalemas. I see the young folks get more creative every year with their bloodletting implements."

Some people laughed in that quiet church laughter.

"Today begins three days of celebrating and eating only meat in honor of the Great Whaler. And, as is customary, I will now recount the story of our glorious saviour..."

"The world is eternal. There are periodic floods or fires that wipe everything out. After the last such catastrophe, which was especially terrible, The Great Whaler and his family were among the only ones left on a small island. There was nothing at all to eat. Fire had burned every plant. The waters had engulfed nearly the whole world. Twelve families had survived on this last piece of land. In his previous life, the Great Whaler, whose name we may not pronounce, was a pearl diver

and a slave who would dive deep to find pearls for his owner. But now there were no fish. He dove again and again, deeper than any of the survivors could, but all he saw were mossy rocks.

“In desperation, he dove down deeper than he’d ever gone before...deeper and deeper he went, though his lungs were bursting and he could barely see in the murky depths. But at last, he saw a crack with light glowing through on the bottom of the ocean. He pulled and pulled until the crack gave way and a pod of enormous glowing green whales came up through the spirit world.

“The whaler rode one whale to the surface. He wrestled with the great fish for three days and nights stabbing it all the while with his pearly knife. Back on the island, his family had given up hope. His brother had taken up with his wife, as was the custom. But then they saw the Whaler walk out of the sea, covered in blood and dragging the dead whale. Everyone helped to drag it up onto shore. They cut open the belly of the beast and it was full of seeds and nuts the likes of which no one had ever seen before. The families gathered these seeds and nuts and planted them. They lived off the whale meat until the plants grew and the waters receded. They populated the world and harvested the crops.

“But in the midst of the eternal cycles of destruction and rebirth, no one had ever done what the Whaler did. He opened a permanent passageway to the spirit world, thus causing a diremption in the immutable order of the universe. His descendants were called the Seekers because they were the only ones who could catch the spirit whales and procure the bones we see today above our heads and the oil with its nearly magical properties. Over time, his genealogy was lost. And the twelve families intertwined and became one. The Seekers dwindled and disappeared, and the time of the spirit whales ceased. The Whaler, though, prophesied that this would be the final cycle. That the world would come to an end if ever the spirit world below enveloped the world above.

“And although our modern scientists have come to challenge much of what the Whaler said and our understanding of what lies beneath the earth, the story still serves as an important parable of self-sacrifice, the importance of family and the ultimate impermanence of all that we hold dear.”

The sermon went on for a while longer. I’d never seen Whalemas like this before. In Mingsbight, these old-fashioned traditions had vanished long ago. The only remnant was that the butchers made special blood red sausages called bloodochino. I’d heard about the fake knives and the blood everywhere, but I didn’t know any communities actually still did it. Afterwards, everyone trooped out of the church, leaving a swath of sticky red blood on the floor for poor Oscar the caretaker to take care of. Outside, I found Stormy. She was with Molly.

“Hi, Molly”

“Hi Howie. I bet they don’t do Whalemas like this in Mingsbight”

“They sure don’t!”

“Well, I’m sure you two lovebirds want to be alone.”

“No, you don’t have to go,” Stormy said without much conviction.

But Molly left, and Stormy and I wandered around the town, hand in hand.

We came to the milk station. Billy on the wall had been repaired and repainted, but not very well. With his crooked smile and sloping face, he looked sinister and grotesque. And then I heard Frank,

“I don’t care what you think you were doing —“

“Come on” I said.

We went around the corner to the parking lot and there was

Frank face to face with Mr. Greenwood.

“Dad!?!”

“It’s okay, sweetie, I just — “

“You just what?” Frank said. “I caught him snooping around the side door looking in the windows.”

“Is there a law against looking in windows?”

“This is private property, bub. I don’t want to see you here again.”

“Come on, Mr. Greenwood, let’s go,” I said.

“Yeah dad, come on.”

Mr. Greenwood gave us some nonsensical explanation, but I knew he was really trying again to get a look at the thermolizer. And sure enough, when Monday morning came around, I was called into Corwin’s office.

“I thought I told you to watch that Greenwood character months ago.”

“Yes sir, but I didn’t find anything out of the ordinary, and then I guess I just let it slip.”

“Well clearly he’s still a problem. And we do not any any time for civilian snoopers. The next few weeks are absolutely crucial, and we cannot allow anything or anyone to interfere. You will resume your investigation of Mr. Greenwood at once. He’s on your route. But we will need solid evidence this time. The...incident...with Professor Florsham was...sloppy. There were questions. And I don’t want any more questions. Do you understand, Howie?”

“Yes sir”

“Between this subversion case and your other mission, you stand

to advance quite far in the next little while Howie. I hope you understand that.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“And you remember what I told you about the milkmen on the front?”

“Of course, sir. Thank you, sir”

“Good. Off to your rounds. Report back to me by the end of the week.”

After work, I met Stormy like we’d planned. We went over to Dr. Barret’s and visited with McMyrtle...the peckerhead was still just lying there doing nothing.

“I’m convinced that if I can just get more oxygen to his brain, he might stand a chance of waking up,” the doctor said.

He’d ordered some oxygen canisters from the mainland. I’d never seen or even heard of such things before. But the doctor said he couldn’t figure out how to get McMyrtle to breathe the stuff.

“You should ask Mr. Greenwood,” I said, “I bet he could invent something.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Howie.”

After that, I proposed hiking out to the cliffs north of town. It was a long walk, but the bench where I’d sat with Corwin was really a nice spot. And Stormy and I had some talking to do.

We hiked along in the golden evening light. No one else was on the path. Stormy stopped at one point, looking out over the ocean. She raised her hands in the air and looked up to the sky.

“I wish sometimes I could just fly off and go wherever I want.”

I watched her. The shape of her neck as she looked up. I knew

I'd never forget that.

"Howie...did you ever want to be something else? I mean, when you were a kid, what did you dream of being?"

"I don't know. I don't think I had any big dreams."

"When I was little I wanted to build things. Huge buildings and castles."

"You know, Stormy, I was thinking. Maybe you're right. Maybe we should go to the mainland."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We might have to wait a bit. I really do have a couple of things to do here. But if I do a good job, I bet it would be easy to get a transfer. I'll be on the path to maybe someday getting a good job with the department."

On the bench, she snuggled a little closer as we sat and looked out to sea. I was a little nervous to tell her what I had to tell her. But I grabbed her hand, and turned to her.

"Stormy..." I said.

She turned to me with those big brown eyes full of expectation.

"Yes, Howie."

"I'm not sure of the right way to tell you this...but Corwin's accused your father of subversion. And he wants me on the case."

20. The Plan

So there I was, standing on the cliff with the sea breeze blowing.

I'd just told Stormy that Corwin wanted me to investigate her dad. I knew she'd be upset, but also I knew from experience that the key to any successful relationship was complete honesty and openness.

"But you're not going to take the case, are you?"

"Well, you know, I thought about it. Your dad really shouldn't have been poking around the station. I couldn't very well say that he wasn't up to anything. And anyways, if I didn't take the case, Mr. Corwin would probably just get someone else to do it. And I'd probably get fired. And then where would we be?"

"So my dad's going to...end up like Mr. Pyman?"

"No! Of course not."

"Well what are you going to do, then?"

It was time for me to think fast. I looked out to sea with a wistful look on my face as if I had a complicated plan.

"Well, it's like this Stormy."

"Like what?"

And then I remembered an episode of Eliza Pike, Detective Extraordinaire, where Matilda Moonrose had kidnapped a child and made the mother do all sorts of terrible things.

“We can’t really pretend like your dad wasn’t snooping. So what we have to do is say that someone else made him do it.”

Stormy opened her mouth, astonished.

“Howie, you’re a genius!”

I smiled to myself. She was right. I was a genius. Corwin must have seen it to or he wouldn’t have been so interested in me.

“Now,” I said, “we just have to figure out who it was that made your dad get so suspicious. It has to be someone who’s got a reason to be annoyed with the milkmen.”

“Maybe Inspector Piercey? I heard him saying that the milkmen are getting too big for their britches in this town. We could say he threatened to arrest my dad if he didn’t do what he said.”

“Maybe...but it might be hard since he’s a police officer. He wouldn’t have to make your dad do anything. He could just go look himself. Maybe someone we know better.”

We thought for a minute. Then an idea came to me.

“You know, Father Wheelan’s been acting suspiciously lately. He’s been having secret meetings with Mrs. Noseworthy. He’s been giving her...private confessions.”

Stormy snickered at this.

“Oh...you think he’s been dipping his whale bone in the Holy Waters?”

“I didn’t see him do that. But I peeked in the back room once and she was definitely kneeling.”

“Ewww.”

“But that doesn’t have anything to do with the milk station.”

“True.”

I took a deep breath and remembered: McMyrtle can't breathe on his own because of the perilous thing the milkmen made him do. He's the one who has a reason to hate the milkmen. But since he's in a coma, maybe...

“Stormy! I've got it. It was Dr. Barrett. He was so mad about what the milkmen made McMyrtle do, that he swore revenge. He plotted to destroy the thermolizer. He enlisted your dad's help. Got him to build strange inventions like the oxygen machine he's going to get your dad to make. We'll say it's meant to blow up the milk station.”

“But why would my dad go along with it?”

“Hmm...We'll say Dr. Barrett refused to give your dad any more medicine until he fulfilled his mission. Your dad needs Podexium or he starts acting really strangely and having seizures. So your dad had no choice.”

Stormy looked at me with steely resolve in her eye.

“It's a long shot. But it just might work.”

We spent the rest of our time together looking at the waves, reading the latest issue of the Tow Law Runner. I pretended to be surprised at all the surprising parts, since I'd read the story already. And then we kissed and kissed. My hands got sweaty and left sweaty marks on the back of her shirt. It felt like we kissed for an hour. Until the sun was setting. We walked back to town hand in hand in the red evening light. It was purely magical. I imagined that we were older and married and going for a long evening stroll after we put the kids to bed. It was a dream to hold onto. But it depended on our plan working.

“Stormy, remember. Tell your dad he's got to stop going anywhere near the milk station, okay?”

“I'll keep my eye on him.”

Then she put her hands on both sides of my face.

“My little genius!”

Then she kissed me with a long deep kiss. And I swear I felt the earth move. Then she ran off for home. I was feeling great, and I went for one of my usual walks through the town. I picked up some dinner at Granard’s and ate it on a bench in Lapham square. And slowly but surely, I noticed that there was some sort of commotion going on. People were walking in a hurry and talking excitedly. I got up and followed. The sun was down now, but more people than usual were out and about. And then there were a bunch of people all rushing along Mercy Street. There was a crowd.

I pushed through and saw, to my amazement, one of the big houses had partly collapsed. The front had fallen and the whole thing was on a slant. A hole must have opened up in the ground and the house fell in. You could see right into some of the rooms. The porch must have fallen right in.

The house used to be on my route. It was Mr. Pyman’s house. And Mrs. Pyman, who’d refused to take any deliveries for a long time now, was outside crying. A lot of men were running around with wheelbarrows of dirt and filling in the hole as fast as they could. Obviously, you couldn’t leave an open hole like that because you never knew what might come out. The ground all around had heaved up and the sidewalk was broken in places. I thought about the cracks that had appeared in the milk station and broke poor Billy’s face, and I realized that we were lucky it hadn’t been worse. I was standing near an old timer with no teeth. He looked at me.

“Never been a sinkhole on this island long as I can remember. Not like the mainland. This island’s solid rock all the way down.”

He spat.

“Something foul’s afoot. Mark my word. ’S not natural.”

I don't know what it is about old guys and their superstitions. I guess maybe they didn't learn about science in school and so they think the world's governed by good and evil spirits. I just figured that sinkholes happen everywhere sometimes and it was just a matter of time before one happened here. There wasn't anything I could do so I kept walking even though it was a Monday night and I had to get up early. My plan kept rolling over and over in my head. In a day or two, I'd go to Corwin and tell him I'd done a thorough investigation and Mr. Greenwood was innocent. But that I'd seen some strange machines and things at Dr. Barrett's. I'd say that Dr. Barrett had ordered special oxygen canisters that could be turned into bombs and that he forced Mr. Greenwood to make special detonating devices. It was bound to work and Mr. Greenwood would be safe and Stormy would be so proud of me. I'd lost track of time and it was dark out. I turned on my heel and started back for home. Along the pier, I heard sobbing. The same sobbing I'd heard before. It was the widow Pyman wandering around alone, inconsolable.

"Mrs. Pyman? What're you doing out here?"

"Just leave me alone. This is all your fault!"

"It's not my fault your house fell apart."

"My life's been ruined since you came here."

Then she stopped sobbing and got mad.

"You don't know what people are really like here. First my husband disappears and now this. They all think I'm cursed. No one would even take me in for the night. They just turned away."

"Why don't you go to the hotel?"

"You think I can afford a hotel?"

"Well then what about the church? Father Wheelan has to help you because he's a religious man."

“I’m not sleeping in a church.”

“If you’re really stuck, what else can you do? I’ll walk over with you.”

She didn’t say anything, but we both started walking towards the church. It wasn’t so late, really and the door to the church was open.

“Hello? Father Wheelan?”

There was no answer. Probably he was in the back room, so I walked back there with Mrs. Pyman and knocked on the door.

“Father Wheelan?”

Then there was a lot of shuffling. I tried the door and it was open. I could hardly believe my eyes. Mrs. Noseworthy was buttoning up her shirt and Father Wheelan’s robes were over his head and he was struggling to put them back on.

“Samuel!” Mrs. Pyman shouted.

It had never occurred to me that Father Wheelan had a first name.

“It was just a confession...I spilled some wine...the sacramental wine on my...”

“How could you? You told me I was...” And then the widow Pyman broke into more horrible sobbing.

Then Mrs. Noseworthy piped up.

“How long has this been going on?!?”

“Nothing’s going on...it was a long time ago, really.”

He’d gotten his robes on just in time for Mrs. Noseworthy to give him a hard shove. He fell over onto his desk and she stormed out. Mrs. Pyman ran out crying too. Father Wheelan got back up and

it was just me and him.

“Mrs. Pyman’s house fell into a hole and she didn’t have anywhere to go.”

“What??”

“So I thought she could stay here.”

He’d sort of pulled himself together.

“Howie. Don’t you say a word about this to anyone. The flesh is frail...we all make mistakes.”

“Oh, it’s none of my business. I can keep a secret. You know, your really big mistake was not locking the door. I’ll let myself out.”

“Yes, you do that, Howie.”

What a strange night, I thought. The next day, I delivered the milk as usual. Mrs. Noseworthy didn’t say a thing and neither did I. I think we’d come to an understanding. It was like we had this new bond between us. Probably I could ask her for a favour some time down the road and she’d have to help me out. I drove by Mrs. Pyman who was dozing on a park bench. Luckily the weather was pretty nice. After work, as I’d planned, I went to see Mr. Corwin. Before I could get to what I wanted to talk about, he handed me a bottle of brown liquid.

“Drink this, Howie.”

I was a bit nervous. I ran through all the things I might have done to annoy him recently. But I hadn’t had time to mess up the Greenwood case yet, so I thought I was probably safe. I had a drink. It was sweet, creamy. Incredibly delicious.

“This is amazing!”

“Chocolate milk. It’s new. I’ve heard that some civilians have been spreading lies about us. We’re going to set up a stand and give

this chocolate milk out to all the children on Sunday morning. A charm offensive.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, sir. You really are a genius.”

He looked at me a bit sideways, like I wasn’t in any position to say such a thing.

“What did you want to see me about?”

“I’ve done some digging and it turns out that Mr. Greenwood is totally innocent. I don’t know why he was looking around the milk station. I think he’s getting old and senile. But I have been over to see Dr. Barrett and I think he’s up to something. He even told me that the milkmen should never have let poor McMyrtle go underground like that. I think he’s the one we should be keeping our eye on.”

“That’s ridiculous, Howie. We didn’t send McMyrtle underground, as you well know. No one knows how he got down there. Greenwood’s not senile at all. His activities pose a real threat to this organization. Do you really want to deflect attention from a man who clearly has no appreciation for the work we’re doing here?”

“No, sir.”

“This isn’t a game, Howie.”

“No, Sir.”

“You understand how serious the situation is?”

“Yes sir”

“We’re under tremendous pressure, Howie. Have you been reading the book I gave you? I’d like to conduct an initiation ceremony next week. There’s...a man...coming from the department next week. He can oversee your initiation. But we also have to have results to show

him.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Mr. Greenwood’s daughter. How would you feel about bringing her in for some questioning? I know you’ve been spending time with her.”

“She doesn’t know anything. Nothing at all.”

“If we can’t get any hard evidence, we may bring her in anyways. That might shake a confession out of Mr. Greenwood. What do you think about that?”

“We have to do whatever we have to do to make the mission work.”

“One last thing, Howie. This is such an important mission that you need some extra supervision. I’ve got Beaver watching you. You won’t always know he’s there. But he will be. In case you get into any trouble. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“That will be all.”

“Can I finish this?”

“Fine, Howie.”

I tipped the bottle back. The cool chocolatey liquid felt good going down. I drank it like it was the last thing I would ever drink. Since, for all I knew, it might be.

I was pretty distraught when I left there. I didn’t know what Corwin knew and how much he knew about what I knew or if Beaver had been watching me already and what he’d told Corwin. I was supposed to see Stormy at the druggist’s. Was Beaver watching me right now? Did it

matter? I really didn't know. I decided to take a round about route to get downtown. That way I might lose Beaver or at least be able to tell if he was after me. I went through a residential block on a hill. There was a steep stairway down. I started going down. I was getting dizzy from all the worrying. I reached for the hand rail, but there wasn't one. So I tumbled down, head over heels.

Until I splashed into the ocean. It was cold dark and salty. But I kept sinking and sinking. My eyes burned, but I kept them open. Down below I could see the moon and stars, a dark shape floating. I tried to swim, but couldn't figure out which direction was up. But finally, I got to the surface. My head broke above the waves, but I must have been on the other side of the planet, because I felt like I was upside down, with all the blood rushing to my head. There was a fishing boat close by. I swam over and clambered in. I kept feeling like I was going to fall into the sky, but I didn't. I was upside down, but sitting in the boat. It was night, but the stars were just blurry grey dots. No moon. It was hard to see. There was a hulking shape in a heavy coat.

"Hey!" I shouted.

No response.

"Hey!"

I grabbed his shoulder, and it was Travis, but he was all grey and tired. Holding a fishing rod. But there was no line.

"Travis? What are you doing here?"

"Fishing," he mumbled.

"Where are we?"

He just muttered something I couldn't understand and turned back away from me.

The blood was still all draining into my face and it felt like my

eyes were starting to bulge. I was dripping wet, but the drops were all floating up to the heavens. I wondered if all the drops were collecting in the bowl of the sky above me.

I looked out to sea. I couldn't see any land, but I could just make out huge columns jutting out of the ocean. They were enormous. My nose was burning from the salt water and I sneezed. The sound reverberated across the water. There was a deep sound like thunder and a column broke in two and crumbled. The top part slid into the water as if it was in slow motion. There was a huge splash. Bits of debris flew out across the water. Travis didn't react.

"Travis?"

He still said nothing.

"Travis? What are you doing here? What's going on?"

"You're an awful person, Howie. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

I was taken aback. Travis had always been so nice to me.

"Look what you did. Nothing solid can stand when you're around. Everything you touch crumbles. Your very existence erodes the foundations of the earth. You're a burden on the land and a blight on the sea."

I felt my tears joining the sea water dripping up into the sea breeze.

Travis turned to me with blank, vacant eyes.

"If you could muster even one decent act, you might find redemption," he said.

And with that, I came unglued. I fell off the boat into the air. I fell, up and up, until I hit the surface of the sky and came up in the harbour of St. Gaff's.

I was gasping. I swam to the edge and pulled myself out. It was still night. It smelled awful down there. I swam through the stinking scum and a dead bird. Bits of trash and filthy foam. It was slow with my uniform and boots. I got to a rusty ladder and pulled myself up. It was night, but not too late. A couple of people were walking on the pier. I think they pretended not to notice me. I ran home...dripping...I got to my door without anyone noticing me, I think. But then, when I got to my door, it was ajar. I couldn't remember if I'd locked it or not. I slowly opened it, preparing myself for a round of mortal combat. But inside, it was just Stormy sitting on my bed. But she was reading my secret book!

"Stormy! What are you doing??"

"What the heck is this? Why are you all wet?"

"Don't read that!"

I grabbed the book out of her hands, which she didn't like.

"Hey!"

"It's a secret handbook for milkmen!"

"It's all about how you can't learn if you read words you don't understand? That's for milkmen?"

"Yes. You have to have the right training to really get into it."

"Okay...so Where were you? I waited forever and then got worried. So I came over. Your door wasn't even locked."

"I had a meeting with Corwin that ran late."

"Then why are you soaking wet? And Howie, you stink."

"I just fell into the harbour on my way home."

"How did you do that?"

“I don’t know. I just got distracted and fell in. It’s no big deal.”

I started pulling my clothes off because I was getting cold.

“Did you talk to Corwin? What did he say?”

I didn’t have a towel or anything in the room so I pulled the sheet off the bed. Stormy was sitting on it and had to get up. The sheet wasn’t very good for drying myself off, but what could I do?

“We’re all on track. I have to gather evidence about Dr. Barrett. But we have to be carefull. There are eyes everywhere watching us.”

“Who’s watching us?”

“The milkmen.”

“But you’re a milkman.”

“Stormy...I know that. It’s complicated, okay? There’s a lot going on here that you wouldn’t understand.”

I could see that she was getting annoyed, but I figured there were certain realities about my job that she was just going to have to get used to.

“Well since it’s about my dad you’d better explain it to me.”

“Listen, the next step is to just go visit McMyrtle as usual and we’ll see what there is in the doctor’s office...then we’ll figure out what evidence we can find. Okay? Just don’t worry about it.”

She left a little while later. She was still miffed, but what could I do? I was tired. I hung the wet sheet on a hook on the door and got into bed. But something was gnawing at my insides. Slowly but surely, I was being overwhelmed with a terrible sense of guilt. I thought about what Travis had said, about me having to redeem myself with good actions. I thought about my duties to my employer. My calling. I realized I wasn’t really taking it seriously. Corwin had given me a job and I had to carry

it out. Even if Stormy was going to be disappointed. I was going to have to find a way to implicate Mr. Greenwood without Stormy ever knowing about it. Then maybe we'd inherit his house, and we could live in it together. I felt a little better after making this resolution. But still, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned. My neighbour was banging on the wall. I decided to look again at the book Corwin gave me. I skipped ahead to chapter two, which seemed less boring than the first one. It was called Lexissium Lactinator. This chapter was a lot better. It was a guide to living for the milkman and had all sorts of good tips.

'The True Lactinator's hygiene must be above reproach. No one can rise very high on the tone ladder when he's got dirty teeth. If you see a fellow milkman with bad breath or brownish teeth, just direct him to the nearest pharmacy where he can find a good boar's hair toothbrush and some baking soda paste. Believe me, he'll thank you for it later. And so will his customers.'

Before long, I was fast asleep. The next morning, I drove out to the fisherman's house. Travis was on the beach when I drove up.

"Two pints. Hey Travis. Did anything weird happen to you yesterday? Last night?"

He gave me a curious look.

"No...weird how?"

"Did you go fishing at night? Did you see me?"

"No. I didn't."

"I guess it was just a dream, or some trick of the brain. I thought I saw you fishing."

His blue eyes looked right into my soul.

"You've always seemed a bit haunted to me, Howie. I've tried to talk to you about it. But you don't seem to believe me."

“I believe you! I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Every Seeker’s path is different, Howie. I battled my demons a long time ago. They’ll never leave you alone until you find the way. They want you back. When you decide you’re ready, I’m here to help.”

And with that, he took his bottles and went inside.

“Bye, Travis.” But he was gone.

No wonder I had weird dreams about him. What a strange guy. I decided to keep a low profile for the next couple of days. Stormy and I visited each other as usual. But she seemed preoccupied for some reason and we weren’t kissing as much. I figured that whatever it was would just blow over. Then, on Thursday, the new magazine arrived. As soon as I got home, I read it.

Eliza was still stuck trying to figure out where Matilda had taken the children from the bus, and then, there was a bit of serendipity. She heard from a milkman that someone had put in an order for six gallons of milk to be delivered to the old abandoned mini-golf course behind the gas station on the edge of town. Eliza knew it could mean only one thing: Matilda has hiding the children there. It was shaping up to be the biggest showdown in the history of Eliza Pike. But then, on the last page, there was a notice that caught my eye and made me really nervous:

‘The Pearly Soap company would like to announce that the final episode of the Matilda Moonrose Saga will be broadcast exclusively on the Tow Law Radio Broadcast Corporation. Tune in to channel 1040! Don’t miss it!’

The ad went on to explain that the big grand finale wouldn’t be printed in the magazine and that Eliza was only going to be on the radio after that and wouldn’t be published in the Tow Law Runner any more. My mind started racing around desperately. I had to find

some tubes so I could get the radio working or I'd never find out what happened to the children!

21. Awakening

I woke up around midnight. I noticed that if I told myself when to wake up at a certain time, I'd wake up right about then. I really didn't want to get up and for a second I just lay there listening to the clock tower down the pier sounding twelve. I just about drifted off again. But then I remembered why I'd woken up and a ball of fear grabbed my stomach. I picked up the lantern I'd borrowed, a tin pail and some matches. I'd gone to sleep in my clothes to save time. And I snuck out of the building as quietly as I could.

It was dark out. No stars. A bunch of low clouds had been hanging over the town for a few days now. It was still humid and stifling even at midnight. No one really kept any lights on here like they did in Mingsbight and there were no gas lamps, so I had to light my lantern to see where I was going. Something the magician said kept rolling around in my head; that I could redeem myself with one decent act. I knew it was true, and that I should have been more diligent in my duty to my country and the milkmen. But my feelings for Stormy were just too strong, and I'd made up my mind to not go after Mr. Greenwood. That made me feel pretty guilty, and I knew Corwin was going to keep getting annoyed at me. But I had a plan. A good plan. And I thought I'd be able to keep Stormy happy and at the same time not have to get Mr. Greenwood sent off to jail...or worse.

I'd decided to just go through the motions of gathering evidence against Mr. Greenwood. But instead I'd try to frame Dr. Barrett. I

knew it wouldn't work, but it would buy me some time. And while all that was going on, and as long as Mr. Greenwood kept away from any milkmen, I'd work on going underground and finding the phlogisterion. The way I saw it, Mr. Corwin was here really to work on the thermolizer. If I could keep him focused on that, he'd probably forget all about any unruly citizens. I was sure his bosses were much more interested in getting the machine working than they were about someone like Mr. Greenwood. I couldn't really tell Stormy everything that was going on, but I told her I had a plan and she trusted me explicitly. I'd even told Mr. Greenwood that he was really in grave danger and that he should keep his head under the covers, so to speak. And he agreed.

Walking along the main street, I looked down Mercy and could see, a couple of blocks away, the hulking shape of Mrs. Pyman's house. It was still half sunk in the ground and tilted over. It gave me an eerie feeling. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen her for a while. Ever since she got mad at Wheelan. I kept going, and it occurred to me that St. Gaff's had changed somehow. I used to feel welcome and at home walking around here, even in the middle of the night. But now, everything felt gloomier. Like the town didn't want me here any more and was getting ready to spit me out somewhere. I tripped a little on one of the new cracks in the sidewalk. As I was recovering, I thought I saw something on the roof of a shop: a gargoyle. But then when I looked, it wasn't there any more. My mind was probably just toying with me because of what I was about to do.

Finally, a friendly face. Billy was glowering at me with his broken face from the wall of the Billings Memorial Milk Station. The whole city seemed to be crumbling these days and the mason hadn't done a very good job.

"Don't worry, Billy," I said, "If I ever get some money or if I'm ever in charge here, I'll make sure they fix you up properly."

I think he appreciated the sentiment. But I had work to do. In the parking lot, I moved the boards that were covering up the hole. I looked around as if to bid farewell to the world up here, but it had started to spit rain so I hurried up and sat on the edge of the hole, held my lantern up and slid down.

I was surprised to see that someone had built a rope bridge here, and it connected with the staircase that led down from Corwin's office. I wanted to surprise Corwin with my initiative, so I'd decided that instead of asking him to use the stairs in his office, I'd just take the hole in the ground. And that way, if I didn't find anything, he'd never know about it anyways. I moved my way along the bridge. Then got on the stairs. They creaked as I went down, but I was happy to take the stairs instead of just sliding blindly down somewhere. It was pitch black, the kind of blackness that gets into your ears and mouth. I knew if I screamed, the sound wouldn't even go anywhere. And for all the light that the lantern gave off, I might as well have been on the bottom of the ocean. And so it was really weird when the sound of my footsteps started echoing. I stopped for a second, and a second later, the steps stopped too. I thought maybe someone was following me, but no one was there when I turned around. That would have been too obvious.

So I kept going. I still couldn't see the bottom. But I started to smell...stale smoke? Half rotten bacon? motor oil? The smell got stronger and the echoes got louder. I could feel him behind me. Hear the laboured breathing. But I didn't dare turn around. Until I got a sharp poke in the back. I swung around, scared, and came face to face with a face full of black teeth, waxy skin, tattered, half burned uniform.

"Why aren't you with your unit?"

"My unit?"

"Where's your rifle, soldier?"

"I'm not a soldier!"

“You absent without leave?”

“No!”

“He’s a goddamned spy!” This was another voice.

I turned to see another soldier. A hole where his left eye used to be. A piece of shrapnel still sticking in there.

“What do you think you’re doing wandering around out here?”

I looked around. I was on a beach. Grey sand stretching right to the horizon on one side and grey choppy water on the other. And the sky was chalky white with no sun. Bits of bony driftwood were scattered around. There were about a dozen of these soldiers. All dead and damned by the looks of them. They were walking over to us.

“I’m looking for Mamifa...the cow?”

The soldiers looked at each other.

“Mamifa?” One said.

And out over the waves there was a flash like lightning, but for a second, I saw huge gold rimmed spectacles on the horizon.

“We too seek the blasted bovine beast.”

“So you’ll help me?”

A couple of them chuckled.

“You’ll be helping us, mate.”

Somehow, it slowly became night. And they danced around a fire and sang ancient sounding songs in praise of the man with the spectacles. The ocean was still and the sky was clear, but without stars or moon, it seemed to suck up any light. They nibbled on sand fleas they caught and I saw one, with his leg bent oddly, chewing on his big

toenail. Later, they slept on the beach on their bedrolls. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep, but the bedroll they gave me was full of bugs and fleas that kept biting my ankles. And I couldn't get comfortable on the sand. I rolled over. The soldier next to me was asleep with his eyes wide open and blank. His mouth was open too. Frozen in a shocked expression like he'd just been hit by a shell. But he was snoring, like the rest of them. The snores echoed out over the water and it sounded like an army of demented frogs in some lonely swamp.

I stayed wide eyed and awake, until whatever passed for dawn here began to lighten the sky.

The soldiers hadn't moved at all. The campfire was just ash. But there was a deep pounding noise, getting louder. The soldier next to me got up, adjusted himself to keep his guts from falling out. He pointed at the horizon. A cloud of dust.

“Wake up boys, here they come!”

And sure enough, before my brain could really figure out what was going on, a herd of huge, mad-eyed cows came running towards us. Most of the soldiers hadn't woken up and were trampled to pieces under the stampede. I ran into the water. The soldiers that had gotten up ran too, but along the beach, where they were gored by the wild cows' horns. And just like that the cows were gone, up the beach, leaving only the gory carcasses of the dead behind. I found my pail, battered, but okay, and I set off after the cows.

I was hungry and thirsty. But I walked all day. The shoreline never changed. The terrain monotonous. But in the distance, I could see columns, reaching up so high that I couldn't see their tops. They were far apart. A couple jutted up out of the ocean too. When the darkness came again, I kept going. Until I heard the heavy breathing of sleeping cows. I saw them as little specks on the horizon, close to a column. I crept closer and closer. They were all lined up. Sleeping

on their feet, on the edge of the water, facing out to sea. They were all about two or three times bigger than regular cows, but I didn't see the one known as Mamifa. But I thought it was still worth a try. I snuck under one, and got a few squirts onto the pail. Maybe two pints worth. Until I heard someone running. I turned and it was a crazed looking farmer in overalls.

“Hey! Get offa my cows!”

Then he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled,

“Coboss!”

They cows woke. One ran headlong into a column. The one I'd been milking bolted and kicked me right out of the hole in the parking lot. It was still night, but somehow, I'd managed to keep hold of the pail.

A kid at school once had a toy. A rubber ball with a metal ball inside it. It would wobble in all sorts of unexpected ways. The phlogisterion moved like that. Like it had a momentum all its own in the bottom of the pail.

I got an hour or maybe a bit more of sleep before work. The first thing I did was to look and see that it wasn't just a dream. But there it was. The bucket of phlogisterion. I threw on my uniform and took off without even having breakfast. I couldn't wait to show Corwin. I knocked on his door when I got to the office and Corwin was already up.

“What is it Howie?”

“Sir? I got the idea last night to try again to go underground. I just went ahead and went down the hole in the parking lot out back. And, I actually found some.”

His eyes lit up. Without a word, he grabbed the pail from my hands and looked down into the pail. But then his brows furrowed.

“That’s all?”

“That’s all I could get!”

He pondered for a moment.

“Okay, Howie. Good work. But I’m afraid we’re going to need more of this. Quite a bit more.”

This made me pretty nervous. It had been hard enough already to get this much of the stuff.

“I see. Alright, I’ll try again as soon as I can. I’ll try again tomorrow night.”

I left the pail with him. It was too bad I hadn’t gotten more phlogisterion, but, on the other hand, I smiled to myself because I was sure my plan was working. There had been no talk about Mr. Greenwood.

As I went on my rounds, I felt like Billy gave me a wink and I was feeling pretty good. Even the gloom that was oozing from everywhere in the town last night seemed to be gone. I’d played all of this just right, and threaded my way between some pretty complicated hoops. I’d found a way to have Stormy and to not get fired. And if they really did get the thermolizer working, I could probably get any kind of promotion I wanted. The rain clouds were gone and the sun was smiling right in my face as I went about my rounds. And it was Thursday, so I had the weekend to look forward to.

After work, I went to Stormy’s place.

“Howie! How was work?” She asked.

“Work was great!”

“You’re looking a bit tired there.”

“I was up late last night...working on a project. A secret project. But I’m feeling fine.”

“Well, we’re just about ready here.”

And just then, Mr. Greenwood came down the stairs. He was carrying some sort of machine with tubes and a kind of balloon attached. It wasn’t too big.

“Hi Mr. Greenwood. How are you holding up?”

“Oh, not too bad, not too bad. I’ve always been a bit of a home body. Staying around the house all the time doesn’t bother me too much.”

Mr Greenwood mostly stayed in after I told him the milkmen were after him.

“Is that the machine?”

“It is. I’ve shown Stormy how to use it.”

Outside, Stormy and I were walking. She had a big purse and she’d put the machine in it.

“Did you bring the other thing?” I asked.

“I did.”

And she patted her bag to let me know it was in there. Out of nowhere, I was possessed with the urge to grab her and give her a big kiss, which is exactly what I did.

“Someone’s in a good mood!”

“I am in a good mood. I think our plan’s working. Corwin hasn’t asked about your dad. I just feel like the luckiest guy alive!”

“That’s great!”

“You ready for the next part of the plan?”

“I am. We frame Dr. Barrett, and then my dad’s home free.”

“Exactly,” I said.

Just then, we arrived at Dr. Barrett’s place and I knocked on the door.

“Hi Howie, Stormy,” the old doctor said.

“We brought the machine my father made.”

“Come in. Let’s have a look, shall we?”

We went into the room where McMyrtle was still lying. Stormy was showing Dr. Barrett how to attach Mr. Greenwood’s breathing machine to an oxygen tank and then onto McMyrtle’s face. But the doctor couldn’t fit the machine onto to the oxygen tank properly.

“I’ll need a special tool. It’s in the shed. I’ll be back in a moment.”

He turned to leave, and Stormy piped up.

“Can I come? I’ve never seen the operating room!”

The doctor smiled.

“Sure, come along!”

As they left she turned and winked at me. Now was my chance. She’d left her purse, and as soon as they were gone, I opened it and found the Morris code machine. It was just a small thing, an old one that Mr. Greenwood had tinkered with a long time ago and forgotten about. I shoved it in a cupboard. Our plan was to say that we’d seen this communication device at the doctor’s place and that maybe he’d been using it to send subversive messages to the enemy. After stashing the Morris machine, I looked over at the peckerhead. He was already hooked up to an old-fashioned breathing machine that

had gears and things like a clock. The doctor's idea was that if they could pump some extra oxygen into to the guy, it would maybe help him more than the regular air he was breathing now.

“Well, Albert, old chum. I got the job and I got the girl and you're just lying there like some sort of idiot. Who's the smart one now?”

Stormy and Dr. Barrett still weren't back and I was getting bored. I know I shouldn't have, but my curiosity got the better of me. I squeezed the breathing tube, only for a second, or two, just to see what would happen. And to my surprise, McMyrtle started making all sorts of choking coughing sounds. I didn't know if he was about to die or wake up and I panicked.

“Dr. Barrett! Come quick!” I shouted.

Then I kind of slapped McMyrtle in the face a couple times.

“Hey! McMyrtle. You all right?”

He coughed some more. And then...His eyes opened!

“Dr. Barrett!” I shouted and the doctor and Stormy came running in.

“He opened his eyes!”

Stormy gasped and the doctor rushed over and lifted McMyrtle's eyelids a bit.

He coughed and spluttered some.

“Let's give him some room,” the doctor commanded.

Stormy and I stood back.

“Albert! Can you hear me? Albert?”

Slowly but sure, he nodded his head.

“Water,” he whispered.

The doctor gave him a sip of water from a glass that was sitting there.

“Just a bit.”

McMyrtle laid back. Bleary eyes. Like he was figuring out how to breath on his own again. The doctor filled him in.

“You’ve been in a coma. For quite some time.”

McMyrtle just nodded. Then the doctor turned to me.

“What did you do, Howie?”

“Nothing! I was just talking to him as usual, telling him we missed him down at the station. And just like that he opened his eyes!”

“You two should go and give him some space.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Stormy asked.

“You know, I think he is going to be okay. He was coherent. No signs of any serious brain damage so far. He’s very lucky.”

Outside, Stormy was all excited

“It’s going to be great to have McMyrtle back, don’t you think?”

I cursed myself for being such an idiot. Why on earth did I have to interfere with him? Well, what’s done is done, I thought. I told myself it probably wouldn’t change anything anyways.

But when I got home, I felt like I’d had the wind knocked out of me. I had some leftovers for dinner and just fell asleep before the sun even went down. The neighbour’s stick banging on the wall reverberated through my dreams. Me walking underground, surrounded by those huge pillars, but something way up high was

banging into them and making them shake. Bits of rubble and bricks were falling all around. It didn't bother me somehow. I woke with a start. I'd been drooling. I could tell it was just before I had to get up. It was quiet and still. I still had my uniform on. And even my boots.

The next day my rounds passed uneventfully. And after work, Stormy had decided that we should go see McMyrtle again at Dr. Barrett's. When we got there, his parents were there too. They were all blubbering and overjoyed that their dear boy was feeling better. His mom even patted me on the head, which I didn't appreciate at all.

"Oh Howie, the doctor told us you were there when he woke up, talking about his job. I bet that's what woke him up. Missing his old life and hearing his old friend's voice!"

"Glad I could help." I muttered

McMyrtle was sitting up in bed smiling at us.

"Well, we'll get going and leave you kids to talk. I think that'll be really good for him," his mother said.

And then she and McMyrtle's dad left. Stormy sat on the edge of his bed and felt his forehead. I just stood there.

"So what was it like? Did you dream?" She asked.

"I think so...I remember walking with an old man through a garden. He told me everything would be okay...and then someone was tinkering with a machine...I was explaining that he was doing it wrong and then he pushed me into some water...I couldn't breathe...and then I woke up."

My face went red when he said all this. Then he turned to me.

"Howie. What's new at the station?"

"Oh, not too much. I've been promoted, of course. Red badge."

I was delighted to see him flinch when I said this.

“We’re planning on giving away chocolate milk after church on Sunday.”

“Chocolate milk?”

“It’s a new thing.”

For some reason, McMyrtle got all contemplative when I mentioned this. Who knows what he was thinking. Later that evening, Stormy went home for dinner, and I just went walking around. I thought I’d sit in the square for a bit, but when I got there, it was all roped off. And the fountain was broken and tilted to the side. Water was still flowing. Inspector Piercey was there and he was carrying a rifle. So were the other police there.

“What’s going on?” I shouted.

“Another blasted sinkhole. Opened in the night. We’ve got to keep watch against anything coming up until we can get someone to fill this in.”

“So it’s bigger than the one at Mrs. Pyman’s house?”

“Much. But don’t you go telling everyone that.”

I felt the old familiar pangs of guilt and worry, but I wasn’t quite sure why. I told myself that everything was still fine, but I couldn’t quite get rid of the clouds of gloom hanging over my head. I just kept walking around. Sure, McMyrtle had woken up, and sure, holes and cracks were appearing all over St. Gaff’s. But the holes weren’t my problem. I still had Stormy. Things were good at work. And I had lots to look forward to.

Sunday was the big day. I didn’t go see Father Wheelan’s service since I had to help Frank and Beaver with the set up. And they, of

course, never go to church. There was a big barrel with a bunch of ice in it, and then a number of bottles of chocolate milk. We had a little stand, all white painted wood. It was a bit of a cloudy day.

“Here they come,” Frank said as people started filing out.

“Why we gotta do this?” Beaver asked in a philosophical kind of way.

“Gotta keep the kiddies happy, boss man says. Go on, Beav, you start.”

Beaver smiled as best he could. I’m not sure if I’ve seen anything quite so scary to be honest. But he filled up a glass and walked over to the first little kid he saw.

“Chocolate milk.”

But the kid just started crying.

“Come on, take it,” he insisted.

But the kid just ran into her mother’s arms. Frank was chuckling to himself. He filled a glass and tried himself. But the first kid’s reaction turned out to be contagious. All the kids looked really nervous and scared of the strange brown liquid. I took my cup and offered it to a little boy who was standing off to the side a bit.

“Here - take it. It’s good!”

He started running and I ran after him. In these cases, persistence is the key. But the kid’s father intervened.

“Leave him alone!” His father shouted at me.

I let it go. Corwin was staring at the scene with an inscrutable look. It seemed like the milkmen’s community outreach effort wasn’t working. Beaver was shouting.

“What’s wrong with you? It’s chocolate. It’s good.”

Shadows had come over Corwin's face. But then, the sun came out from behind the clouds, and it was right in my eyes. I held up my hand to shield my face. And then I heard it:

"Hey kids! What time is it? It's time to get chocolatey!"

Some kids giggled. And there was Albert McMyrtle, smiling ear to ear and doing some sort of ridiculous walk, arms and legs flailing. Without acknowledging me, Frank or Beaver McMyrtle came over, poured three cups of chocolate milk, and then, laughing and making faces like a madman, handed them out to the children. The kids were smiling. Their dimwitted eyes glistening at the peckerhead.

"Don't forget, kids! Tell your parents to order a bottle of this chocolatey treat every week!"

"McMyrtle!" Corwin shouted.

I'd told him McMyrtle was up from his coma, but no one expected him back any time soon. And now Corwin was smiling. Actually smiling. I don't think I'd ever seen such a thing before. Now that McMyrtle had broken the ice, people were lining up to try out the novel treat. Corwin was getting ready to make a speech, but then there was another interruption.

"Don't touch that stuff! They're a pack of lying bastards!"

It was Mrs. Pyman. Wild-eyed with her clothes looking like she got them from the town dump. Everyone turned. No one said anything. Everyone got really quiet.

"I know what you milkmen are doing. I know what you did to my husband. I know what happened to Florsham and I have proof! They're killers. Killers! They killed my husband!"

Beaver grabbed her under her arms and carried her away. As we were all watching her struggle in vain, Corwin spoke up.

"Thank you all for coming today! I'm glad you enjoyed the latest

twist on our product. I do hope that it served as a sliver of light in these otherwise dark days. I do apologize for that outburst. We all know how much the pressures of war can affect us. Especially the fairer sex. But the main thing is for us to stick together. We can't allow the powerful unity of our community to be compromised by baseless accusations. As soon as we start accusing each other, we are lost. We're all in this together. And that means that all of us, each and every one, must be constantly on the lookout for any suspicious behaviour, like what we've just witnessed. If you see anything, anything at all out of the ordinary, you pass the information along to your milkman who will see that the proper authorities are alerted. And with that, please enjoy as much chocolate milk as you'd like!"

By this time, Wheelan had emerged from the church and was standing beside me. He'd helped himself to a whole bottle of milk.

"Pretty good! He must've been a preacher in another life."

On Monday afternoon, Corwin had me and McMyrtle in his office. And that's when my whole world fell apart in front of me. The episode with Mrs. Pyman, it tunred out, had bothered Corwin much more than he'd let on.

"I've had a chat with Albert, and he understands the importance of stamping out subversion wherever we find it. We can't have any more incidents like the one yesterday with that woman. The populace of this town is getting unruly. We need to make an example of someone. Get these people back in line. And that's why, Howie, McMyrtle will be taking over your route. Howie, you'll get your new route from Beaver in the morning."

I glanced over, and the stupid peckerhead was nodding solemnly at me. All I could think about was shoving his annoying face in a toilet somewhere.

“McMyrtle’s been apprised of the Greenwood situation, and he’s prepared to take up the case where you left off. Hopefully with quicker results. Also, Howie, there were complaints from the department about your radio transmissions. Something about asking for a red badge while making a coded transmission? I’d like you to take McMyrtle up to the radio shed this week. Show him how everything works. Albert will be delivering the messages from here on out.”

McMyrtle and I walked out of Corwin’s office. The light outside hurt my eyes. I felt like my insides had been ripped out, but at least I had —

“Stormy said she’d meet us at the druggist’s,” he said.

“When did she tell you that?”

“Oh, she dropped by my house last night to check up on me. My parents always liked her.”

The rest of the afternoon was a blur. Stormy laughing and slapping McMyrtle’s knee. Twirling her hair. I just sat there saying nothing. Outside, she knew what was going on.

“Don’t be jealous, Howie! We’re together. That doesn’t mean I can’t be friends with Albert. We used to all hang out.”

“That was before Corwin gave him my route and pretty much my whole job.”

“We’re together, okay? We’ll figure it out. So what if you’re delivering milk to different people now?”

“Sure. But guess who’s in charge of finding evidence against your father now?”

She stopped.

”Oh. Well, my dad hasn’t done anything, and I’m sure I can

convince Albert to leave him alone.”

“Sure,” I said.

And before I knew it, there we were, driving up the mountain to the radio shed. McMyrtle kept droning on about how many bottles of milk they produce every day in Mingsbight and all sorts of other irritating facts. But a new plan was forming in my head. When we got to the station, I looked up at the tower.

“First thing you’ve got to do is check that the tower is in proper working order,” I said. “The weather can be pretty harsh up here, and sometimes important parts can come unscrewed. Just wait here a second.”

I went into the shed and grabbed a big wrench.

Then I said,

“In fact, now that I look, I can see that something looks loose up there. Do you see that loose wire?”

“No, where?”

“Right up there by the top.” He moved in front of me.

He squinted.

“I don’t think I see anything.”

And while the idiot was looking up, I raised the wrench over my head.

22. The Radio, Part One

There comes a time in a man's life when he has to make some decisions about the kind of person he's going to be. Is he just going to go along with the crowd and do the same humdrum things that everyone else does? Or will he strike out ahead in some new direction no one's ever seen before? Me? I always felt that I was cut out for greatness. I knew what I wanted from life and I knew how to get it. And on the other hand, there were people like Albert McMyrtle. There he was, looking around in vain for a loose wire. A guy like that? With no direction. No new ideas? He'd never amount to much. I raised the wrench over my head and pointed with it.

"Right there. You don't see that loose wire?"

But the idiot must have been blind because he just kept staring, like an idiot, and not seeing anything.

"Where? Oh, yes, I see now."

"So just climb up there and tie it down."

"Am I going to get electrocuted?"

I thought for a moment about how I would answer. I didn't think there was any way he'd get zapped by those wires. But maybe there was a way to change that.

"Is it safe?" He asked again.

“Of course, it’s safe. I do it all the time. You think I’d tell you to do something dangerous?”

“Well, you did tell me to go down that hole.”

“Look, are we going to send this message or not? It’s twenty to five. We have to send the message at five.”

“Oh, right.”

So he got on the ladder that went part way up the radio tower. I went in and thought about turning the transmitter on. Even if there was only a little shock, it might be enough to make the peckerhead fall. No one could blame me for that. But when I got inside, a much better idea flashed through my mind. I didn’t have much time, so I closed the latch on the door, which would make it impossible for McMyrtle to come in. I grabbed a screwdriver from the drawer of tools and unscrewed the back panel of the radio transmitter. My heart was pounding, and I could feel my face getting red with excitement and suspense. With a bit of fiddling, I got the panel off. And there they were. A pair of them. The answers to all my prayers. Shiny, round and perfect. Two military grade vacuum tubes. As gently as I could, I grabbed them and pulled them out. And there was McMyrtle, already pounding on the door.

“Hey! It’s locked! Let me in!”

“Just a second!”

I tried not to get distracted while I wrapped the tubes up with some wax paper that I’d used for my sandwich at lunch, and I put them in my bag.

“Come on! What are you doing in there?”

I opened the door for him.

“Sorry, buddy. Force of habit. I always lock the door when I’m sending messages. You never know who might be out there. Come on! We’ve only got a few minutes.”

McMyrtle got out the sheet with the message we were supposed to send and sat down in front of the radio.

“How do I turn it on?”

“Just turn the crank several times to prime the battery. Haven’t you ever used a radio before?”

“No, I haven’t. This one?”

He twisted a dial that was obviously not a crank before I could answer.

“No! Don’t! That’s the frequency oscillator. Right there. On the side.”

He turned the crank. And nothing happened. So he kept cranking.

“Does it take a while to work?”

“No. Well, yes, but the lights should come on right away. Then the battery kicks in and it stays on for a long time.”

“It’s almost five! What’re we going to do?”

The idiot was looking really nervous, and I decided to turn to really stick it to him. I looked carefully at the oscillator knob he’d turned.

“Did you turn this back to where it was?”

“No! I didn’t. I don’t know where it was!”

“Oh no. I think you must’ve screwed it up.”

He turned beet red and there was sweat all over his forehead. He stopped turning the crank.

“Can you fix it?”

“I’m a milkman, not a radio engineer. You were just supposed to follow my instructions. I don’t touch anything I’m not supposed to touch.”

“So we can’t send the message?”

“Nope.”

“What’re we going to tell Mr. Corwin?”

“We’ll have to tell him the truth. You broke the radio and now the Department of Lactic Affairs won’t be getting the latest intelligence from this island.”

I was glowing inside as the peckerhead tried to think of different ways we could fix the radio or get the message across the channel. He even suggested using the telephone in the church.

“You ask Corwin about it if you want, but it seems to me that if they could just send these messages with the phone, they wouldn’t have been sending me all the way out here every week. Come to think of it, I don’t even know for sure who gets these messages. No, I think you have to bite the bullet on this one, pal o’mine. You really messed up.”

Some people talk a lot when they’re nervous and it turned out that Albert McMyrtle was one of those people. On the way back, he decided to give me an impromptu lesson on the geography of the island. He started listing the names of every Lomond on St. Gaff’s. Lomonds are any mountain that’s over 3000 feet. I just about kicked him out the side of the milk truck, but then I remembered about the tubes and smiled. Now that I had the tubes, I could get that old radio at Mr. Greenwood’s place working. I was finally going to be able to listen to Eliza Pike on the radio! And I’d really messed with McMyrtle’s mind. I’d just killed two birds with one stone. McMyrtle just kept droning on.

“There are 8 of them, which is surprising when you think of how small the island is. First, there’s this one, Mount Glenmoy, then as you go north from here, there’s Mount Langwell, which is just a bit over 3000 feet. Then mount Brae, mount Glenrussel, mount Lochboy...”

It was a pleasant evening, and once I tuned McMyrtle out, I was able to enjoy the warm breeze on my face. The rolling hills. I thought to myself. Life may throw a lot of lemons at you, but if you can learn how to dodge them, you can accomplish anything. I was just a kid on the street looking for any old job, but now, not only had I become a high-ranking milkman, I’d learned to maneuver around the politics of a very complicated organization. Everyone thought McMyrtle was the golden boy with the bright future, but now I thought it was becoming clear to everyone that I was the one who was going to succeed. But then he got quiet for a minute and changed the topic of his monologue.

“So. Howie. Have you been over to Stormy’s house lately?”

“Sure.”

“You guys spend a lot of time together, I suppose?”

“Right.”

“Did you ever...stay over there? At the house?”

I knew what he was getting at, but I wasn’t going to fall for it.

“Look, I’m not going to help you with your investigation. Corwin put you on the case, so Mr. Greenwood’s your responsibility now.”

He didn’t say anything after that. Point: Howie Coxwell. I’d outsmarted him again. We pulled into town and it was getting dark. That wonderful evening stillness was setting in and I wanted to see if I could maybe get the tubes into the radio and get it working before Stormy and Mr. Greenwood went to bed. But then bright boy had other ideas.

“I really think we should go see Mr. Corwin right away.”

“He gets up even earlier than we do. He’s probably gone to bed. We can’t do anything about it tonight anyways.”

“We didn’t complete the task he set out for us, and it is our duty to let him know immediately. If I was the boss, I would want to know right away.”

I supposed he was right, but holy cow was he annoying. Just as I’d expected, Corwin must have been sleeping, because it took him a while to get to the door, and he looked a bit disheveled. But, he was still wearing his uniform. Maybe he wore it to bed sometimes like me to save time.

“I’m sorry to say that we were not able to send the message,” McMyrtle said in his most dutiful voice.

There was a moment of freezing cold silence.

“Why not?”

“We had a problem with the radio.”

But I wasn’t about to let that ambiguity just hang there in the breeze.

“I was showing him how to operate the radio, and he just started twisting the wrong dials and then the radio wouldn’t start.”

“Coxwell’s instructions were not clear enough,” with all sorts of indignation.

“My instructions were fine. You’re not supposed to just start pushing buttons and pulling knobs all over the place!”

“Quiet!” Corwin demanded.

I could see that Corwin was turning over in his mind various things he could do to McMyrtle. But that’s what you get when you send someone incompetent to do a job instead of someone who

knew what they were doing. But I held my tongue. I was sure he'd come to the same conclusion on his own eventually. But he just stood there, pondering, until:

“Ryan's been doing a good job spraying for flies. But it's just about time for the quarterly deep cleaning of the distributor. I want you boys to take care of that. Tonight.”

I could hardly believe my ears. I'd just explained that the whole mess was McMyrtle's fault, and yet, here I was getting punished just like him. I knew better than to protest. I chalked it up to me being the commanding officer who was responsible for the stupidities of his subordinates. I made a mental resolution to be stricter with McMrtle in the future.

So there we were, unscrewing all the pipes of the machine that takes the milk from the big vats and puts it into bottles. It was gross work. Everything was pretty clean in the milk station, on the surface, but I guess over time, a lot of grunge builds up in the little nooks and crannies you can't see. So we had these wire pipe cleaners and we had to scrape all this old milk gunk off the threads of every pipe. If I'd been alone, the job would have been done really fast. But with McMyrtle there examining every single piece of pipe, even the parts no one would see, it was going to take us all night. There was no way I was going to see Stormy now. And all because this buffoon had to mess up the radio. I looked over at him...holding the pipes up close to his face and studying them. Scraping a bit and looking again. The pipe cleaner I was using slipped and scratched my finger.

“Ouch. You know, you really are an idiot? As the ranking person here, I'm ordering you to finish this and I'm leaving.”

At this he stiffened and stood up. He looked mad, which I'd really never seen before.

“You’d better watch what you say, Howie. You stole my girlfriend, but I let it slide because I thought we were friends. But don’t you talk to me like that anymore. If I hadn’t gotten hurt when I went down the hole, I would have been promoted first and you know it.”

“Okay, take it easy. I’ll stay if it means that much to you. But it’s not like you have anything else to do.”

It was about one o’clock in the morning before we were done. We walked out onto the street. My uniform was sticky and sweaty, but there was a cool refreshing breeze, and the moon was bright. It felt good to be outside. McMyrtle and I both stopped and took a deep breath as we got out. We’d had our differences, and I still thought he was a complete peckerhead. But I felt a bit less annoyed with him now.

“Well, I’m off,” I said.

“See you in the morning.”

“Yeah, see you.”

He went his way and I went mine. I walked past Billy and the parking lot. I thought I heard a squirrel or something running around, but I didn’t think much of it until later. I had to get home quick if there was any chance I was going to get any sleep tonight. I put my hand in my bag and felt them. The tubes were still there and still intact and just waiting to be used. I couldn’t wait. Thinking about it put some pep in my steps. Then I saw - just out of the corner of my eye - the same gargoyle I’d seen the other night. Just for a second. But I wasn’t going to let it bother me. I wasn’t going anywhere tonight no matter what. Even when I heard something tittering, I just quickened my pace even more and concentrated on being where I was. I focused single-mindedly on getting home.

But then there was this growing sound. It seemed to be echoing

from the hills outside of town. Or was it close? It sounded like...dogs. I looked around because I was getting nervous. I thought I saw one running down an alley. It didn't look like the hound that had followed me for so long. It was grey. And long.

Wolves. They were howling. One ran across the road and I could have sworn that it ran right through the wall of a shop. One was standing in the distance ahead of me. Just standing there growling. So I turned down the wrong street. I was off track and found myself on the pier, trying to get away. I couldn't tell if they were following me or just running around aimlessly. But one thing was sure. These wolves were really here and not just in my head.

I heard a woman scream. I crouched behind a stone wall and saw Mrs Pyman running down the pier. Her clothes were all ragged and full of holes. Three wolves were chasing her and catching up fast. I couldn't watch as they attacked her. It was a horrible thing, but if you don't bathe or take care of yourself, of course you're going to get attacked by dogs. Then, just like that, the dogs seemed to run off in some other direction and I could hear Mrs. Pyman sobbing and crying. I peaked out and saw, down the pier, Mrs. Pyman in a crumpled heap. And a figure I couldn't make out sort of wandering aimlessly away from her. I rushed out to see if Mrs. Pyman was okay even though I knew the wolves might come back. Since that's the kind of guy I am. I looked around for the figure, but it was gone. Mrs. Pyman had bites on her arms and legs and she really stank. She was pretty shaken up. I tried to help her to her feet.

"Hey. Mrs. Pyman. Come on get up. We've got to get to Dr. Barrett."

"You...you brought them?"

"What? The wolves? No. You're hurt. Come on."

I managed to get her up and slowly but surely we limped off

towards the doctor's office. It was taking forever and there was no way I was going to get much sleep tonight. It was very annoying. But then she suddenly froze for no reason, shook my arm off and said.

“Leave me alone!” And she hobbled off down some street.

This was the second time I'd had to help Mrs. Pyman out. I'd tried to get her fixed up with a place to stay at the church, and now I'd rescued her from a pack of wolves. But some people you just can't help no matter how much you want to. So I let her go and walked home. Then I got scared. I frantically felt inside my bag. Thank God. In all the commotion, the tubes were still fine.

I could hardly sleep, and after a lot of tossing and turning and thinking I was awake when maybe I was asleep, I just decided to get up early and go to work. When I got to the parking lot, I noticed that I'd forgotten to put the wooden planks back on the hole in the far end where no one ever goes. And now the hole was quite a bit bigger. I made a mental note to cover it back up when I had some time. A bit ahead of schedule, I took the coast road out to see Travis and Naomi. This was my favourite part of my route. It was another beautiful day and another beautiful dawn. I tried to push away all the unpleasantness of last night. But then I remembered. This is where I'd seen that weird gargoyle. On this very road, months ago. How strange.

When I got to the fisherman's house, Travis came out to meet me.

“Everything okay, Howie?”

“Sure, why wouldn't it be?”

He looked puzzled.

“You don't look well.”

“It was a late night. Say. Does Naomi still have that gargoyle? The stone one?”

His face got dark.

“Why do you ask? What were you doing last night?”

“Oh I was up late working. And then, I thought I saw...it was nothing.”

And then he changed the subject.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Howie.”

I was getting the bottles out of the truck.

“Really? Why?”

And then I heard another truck. I looked down the road. The blood drained from my face. It was McMyrtle. In my delirium, I’d accidentally gone out on my old route and I was going to be really late with my own deliveries.

“I’m in charge of McMyrtle, so I came out just to make sure he was doing his rounds properly. But now I have to go.”

Without another word, I put the bottles back, hopped in the truck and turned it around just as McMyrtle was arriving. I didn’t say a thing to him since I didn’t feel like explaining myself. I pretended not to hear his annoying voice as we drove past each other.

“Hey Howie! Did you forget your route this morning?”

So I went on my rounds. I didn’t much like the new route. Instead of going out to see Travis and enjoying the dawn and then getting to look at all the rich houses around Mercy and Grand, I delivered milk to the poorer part of town around where I lived. More clapboard row houses and a lot of shipbuilders. A lot of the people were from Mingsbight and came just to build the ship. Lots of wives with their husbands off in the war came to work. Old men with no families. Some men who couldn’t fight for one reason or another. Some came alone to work and left their families back in the city.

Those ones mostly ended up hitting the bottle. As I was dropping off a couple of bottles at one house some guy came up to me.

“Psst. Hey. Milkman. I got a tip for you.”

He wasn’t so steady on his feet and I figured he was drunk.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“My neighbour. He’s always writing. Letters. Get it? Letters. I watch him through the window. Pages and pages he writes. But I ain’t never seen him mail any of them. See? Ya see, right?”

“Thanks, we’ll look into it.”

For some reason rumours had spread that the milkmen were really interested in getting neighbours to rat each other out. Especially in this much sadder part of town, they seemed to think there would be some kind of reward if they discovered that their neighbours were traitors.

At lunch, I ate my sandwich in my truck and re-read the last episode of Eliza Pike. And it really was the last episode because this was the last one that was going to be printed. From here on out, she would just be on the radio.

Eliza had discovered that Matilda Moonrose was hiding the children in an old cabin high in the snowy mountains.

She’s made her way by steamship to the town closest to the mountains, hired some tough local guides, armed herself with guns and knives and tents and ropes and set off. How Matilda had gotten the children up there, no one knew. But on and on Eliza went. Through a blizzard and across a scary rope bridge. They’d been attacked by a snow bear and all of Eliza’s guides had run away. But Eliza was totally determined. And then, just before sunset on the third day, she saw smoke curling in the distance. And after another mile or so across the glacier, she spotted the black cabin where Matilda was holed up. When

she got pretty close, Matilda came out of the cabin with a big smile on her face and an even bigger rifle in her hands.

“I’ve been expecting you, Eliza Pike.”

“Where are the children, Matilda Moonrose?”

But Matilda just started to laugh an evil laugh,

“Where are they?!?!”

But Matilda just kept laughing.

And just then, from all around, the children appeared - but they all had a dazed, brainwashed look on their faces, and they were armed with knives and guns of their own. And they were all closing in on Eliza! And then Matilda said,

“Like I said. I’ve been expecting you. We’ve all been expecting you!”

What a cliffhanger! This has the final showdown, and I couldn’t wait to see how Eliza would get out of it.

After work, I saw Mr. Corwin coming out of the church with a bunch of papers. I sort of waved and I was pretty sure he saw me, but he just hurried up in the direction of the milk station. Then I noticed Father Wheelan looking through the partly opened church door. When he saw me, he stepped out and motioned for me to come over.

“Listen, Howie, you’ve got to talk to McMyrtle for me. He says he can’t go to Granard’s during work hours to get me a sandwich. I’m a busy man and I can’t take the time to walk all the way over there every day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Father Wheelan.”

“Could you talk to him? Try to make him see reason? I even offered him half a Rupert, but he wouldn’t budge.”

“I don’t know. He’s pretty by the book. But I’ll ask him. Corwin’s always saying we need to have good relations with the civilians in town, so maybe I’ll put it to him that way.”

“Thanks Howie, I knew I could count on you.”

“Hey. What was Mr. Corwin doing in the church anyways?”

“Oh! Nothing, nothing. Just a small matter.”

I couldn’t believe what a silly guy McMyrtle was. I’d been getting sandwiches for Father Wheelan for a quarter Rupert and McMyrtle wouldn’t even do it for twice that!

Later, at Mr. Greenwood’s house, I showed him the tubes I’d found. We pulled the old radio out from under the bench outside, and it was still in fine shape. Those military radios are really built to last! Mr. Greenwood took the back panel off. And we were both really excited to see that the tubes I’d found fit perfectly.

“Can we turn it on?”

“I’m afraid not, Howie. This is battery powered.”

“What does that mean? That we can’t use it?”

“No, I didn’t say that. It looks like it takes a standard battery pack. You can get one at McMyrtle’s Dry Goods.”

In case you forgot, McMyrtle’s parents ran a dry goods store that apparently sold battery packs.

“I can get the battery tomorrow!” Stormy said, “and then we can listen on Saturday!”

I couldn’t wait. It was like a dream come true. I never thought I would actually be able to get the radio working in time for the last episode!

On Saturday, Stormy came over in the afternoon like we'd planned. I was excited all day. I took a bath and tried to clean the place up. I put on my best clothes and could hardly wait for her to get there. I actually thought I might get exhausted just from the excitement of waiting for her. Not only were we planning to listen to Eliza Pike on the radio for the first time, we'd also been talking about taking the next steps in our relationship.

When she finally got there, she had that blue flower perfume on and when she came in, it was like when you open the shutters in a dark room and then the sun shines in. She was smiling and I was smiling. I just grabbed her in my arms and we started kissing and kissing. We moved onto the bed, and, after a lot more kissing, I decided to take a chance. I got her shirt off. I fiddled with the bra for a while. But it was no use, and Stormy had to undo the hooks herself. I made a mental note to buy one of these things from Lainy's downtown so that I could practice at home. I didn't want that to happen again. But...there they were, right in front of me. The answers to all my prayers. Round, perfect and glowing.

I reached out to touch them as gently as I could. But I guess Stormy was ticklish because she laughed and brushed my hands away. Then she took my hands and planted them firmly. Nothing ever felt so right in my hands before. After that, we kissed and rolled around on the bed. I'm not sure how long we were at it because the sun was going down when we were done.

"Ready?"

"I'm ready!"

"You've got the battery?"

"I do!"

I grabbed the radio and Stormy grabbed the last issue of the Tow Law Runner. She had the battery in her purse. When we left the room

and went up the stairs, we bumped into Mrs. Somertag, the landlady.

“Oh, hi Howie. Where are you off to?”

“Oh! I guess I just missed my floor!” I said.

“Come on, let’s go back.”

“But I thought we were —“ Stormy asked, confused.

“Come on!”

I got Stormy to go back down with me and we went back to my room.

“She doesn’t like anyone to go on the roof. Let’s just wait a second until she’s gone.”

When we didn’t hear her anymore, we snuck up the stairs, then up the little ladder that led to the roof. We were giggling, and excited to be sneaking up there. I pushed the hatch off and we climbed up. And then we just stood there. The sky was blood red with the sunset, and it looked like the whole town and the sea were blazing with fire. We could hear the town below, but it all seemed quiet and unreal up here. And it put us in a quiet mood too. Like the whole world was there just for us. I felt like my whole life was leading up to this.

“Let’s get this thing working.”

Without much talking, I got the back flap off the radio, and we put the battery in. Then we looked up the numbers of the radio station in the magazine. The show was going to be on at seven and it must have been close to seven now.

23. The Radio, Part Two

The night fell hard, like a heavy boot stomping on all of my dreams. We stood there, on the roof as the stars came out and cast their dull red light on the town. All we heard from the radio was static. I turned all the dials, thinking maybe they'd printed the wrong radio numbers in the magazine. But it was all in vain.

"Wait. Is that it?" Stormy asked.

But it was just some gibberish.

"That's really weird," she said. "Howie, come on. It's not the end of the world."

"They're only going to play it once. Now we won't know what happened."

"Oh, someone heard and they'll tell us."

"It's not the same. I wanted to hear her voice."

Stormy took my hand.

"You can hear my voice. I liked what we were doing...before."

Nothing could really ease the pain in my heart after waiting so long and working so hard to listen to Eliza Pike on the radio. But, with the cool sea air blowing over us and Stormy warm against me, and her warm kisses, I felt like, for the moment at least, I could forget. She pulled me by the hand back towards the ladder and we went back down

towards my room. But then, there was Mrs. Sommertag in the hallway. She seemed to be lurking there in wait for us.

“You know I don’t like you going up on the roof, Howie.”

“Oh sorry, missus, I guess I forgot. Well, we’re just going to head in, so goodnight. “

“Tut tut, Howie. I’m afraid we’re having to establish a new rules in the house. My sister told me she was very disturbed by all the noises earlier. All that smooching and she was trying to get some sleep. You know she doesn’t sleep so good.”

“You mean I can’t have people over in my room?”

“You know, Howie, this isn’t a bordello or some sort of scandalous hotel. It’s a respectable boarding house building, and you two aren’t married at all, so it’s really not an appropriate thing to be going on here.”

It was pretty annoying that I’d have to sneak Stormy into my room from now on. But there wasn’t much we could do about it tonight. So I just decided to walk her home. It wasn’t so late, but no one was around since everyone in this town seemed to go to bed really early. Stormy put my arm around her waist and we walked really close together. It was a bit of a brisk night and it was exciting to be out downtown with no one around, and feeling her against me. When we got close to the church, she stopped and turned me around to face her. We kissed one of our long kisses.

“Have you made out with anyone in a churchyard?” She asked.

I didn’t want to tell her I’d never really made out with anyone other than her anywhere before. But before I could say anything, we heard a woman scream. And the old familiar snarling I’d heard a couple of night ago. Up the sidewalk, we saw Mrs. Noseworthy running towards us. And a wolf was chasing her. It was a slightly

whispy blue wolf. And just like that, before we could do anything. it had her leg in its jaws. Stormy ran over and tried to kick the thing. I was really impressed at how courageous she was and once again counted my lucky stars at how lucky I was to be with such a woman. But her kicks didn't seem to do anything. It was strange.

I only half-heard her shouting at me,

“Well don't just stand there, Howie!”

But then, with all the commotion, and I guess since he was expecting her anyways, Father Wheelan came out of the church with a lantern and the wolf ran off.

“By the Whaler, get off her!” He shouted.

Maybe it was startled by the noise, or maybe it didn't like Father Wheelan because he was such a holy man.

“My God, my leg!” Mrs. Noseworthy shouted.

She sat down on a bench in the churchyard and lifted up her skirts. And there were bloody bite marks and scratches all over her leg.

“Should we get Dr. Barrett?” Stormy asked.

“No, no, don't bother. I'll be fine”

But Wheelan was worried.

“You're really bleeding. Better safe than sorry.”

“We'll go wake the doctor,” Stormy said.

But then we all stopped. There was growling all around us. It sounded like the wolf went to get the rest of the pack.

“Come on, hurry. You kids better come inside.”

Father Wheelan helped Mrs. Noseworthy up and she limped towards the door.

“Well come on, you can’t stay out here,” the priest said.

“What should we do?” Stormy asked.

“I think we’ll be fine. I’ll walk you home.”

But then the growling got louder.

“Look,” Stormy whispered.

Shadows were moving in the dark. We saw the glint of glowing eyes. We ran inside and Father Wheelan closed and bolted the door, grumbling.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. Wolves...right in the town.”

Mrs. Noseworthy put her leg up on a pew. Father Wheelan went into the back office and came back with some old shirts or cloths and a bottle of water. Stormy helped clean up Mrs. Noseworthy’s leg and Father Wheelan tied a shirt above the bites. There was blood all over the floor.

“You’ll never get that out,” Mrs. Noseworthy said.

“Oh, Oscar’s got a knack for things like that. But what were those things? They did not seem like any wolves I’ve ever heard of.”

“I saw them before. Thursday. There were a bunch of them chasing Mrs. Pyman and me. It was awful.”

“What? You didn’t tell anyone? Is she okay?”

“I wasn’t sure if...I think she’s okay, yes. When I first heard them, I thought they were coming from the hills on the edge of town. And then they seemed to come down into town.”

Outside we heard them. Howling. Father Wheelan was pondering.

“The hills. Yes. Gordon Gosse told me something strange’s been going on in the hills. Said there was a strange darkness on the edge of town where he lives. I didn’t know what he was talking about.”

I looked up at the whale bones. It was amazing how they glowed night and day. It was really eerie, though, to be trapped in the church with its dull green light and with the sound of the wolves outside.

“Looks like we’re all stuck here tonight,” Wheelan said. “I’ve got an extra bed in my quarters in the back. Mrs. Noseworthy can take that. But I’m afraid you kids’ll have to make do out here. I think I’ve got a couple of extra blankets.”

Mrs. Noseworthy hobbled back with Father Wheelan, and he came back a couple minutes later with a couple of crimson wool blankets.

“These might be a bit scratchy, but it’s all I’ve got. You’ll each have to take a pew. I’ll see you in the morning.”

And off he went. We made a show of setting out our blankets on different pews, but a couple of minutes after he was gone, I went right over to Stormy and her inviting arms. The pew wasn’t really big enough, so I laid down a blanket in the aisle on the wood floor. I took off my shirt and rolled it up for a pillow. The blankets were indeed scratchy, but we didn’t care. There was something really exciting about being in here, with the wolves howling outside. I took off her shirt and right away I got her bra off. She was looking at me with this real intensity. Right in my eyes. And she looked so good. Her smooth skin in the dim green light. I ran my face down her neck and across her chest...breathing her in...then came back up and pushed into all that thick black hair. She smelled so good I could have devoured her.

“Do you think they’ll hear us?” She whispered.

“I bet they’re wondering the same thing,” I said and we both giggled.

My hands were all over her. And then she pushed my hand down. I was trembling a bit. Her breathing was heavy and she was looking into my eyes with that piercing look. I could feel her. Hot

and wet. She slowly nodded. I undid the button on her pants...

And I'm sorry to say that I can't tell you about what happened next. You'll have to use your imagination. But it was really amazing. My very first time. It was like those hungry wolves outside were giving us a serenade. I slept one of the best sleeps of my life that night. It was cool in the church, but we kept each other warm. Early in the morning, Father Wheelan came in. He made a lot of noise he didn't have to make, and I figured he had some inkling of what was going on and wanted to warn us of his arrival. We were dressed, at least, and I sort of rolled away so that when I got up, it looked like I'd been sleeping a couple of feet from Stormy. We didn't hear the wolves anymore.

"How's Mrs. Noseworthy?" Stormy asked.

"Oh, she's fine. Still sleeping. We'll have to get the doctor to clean up the wound, but I think we did a good job of it. Listen, Howie I think those wolves are gone. Could you go over to Mrs. Noseworthy's house? Mr. Noseworthy must be worried sick."

"And I'd better go let my dad know we're okay," Stormy said.

Stormy and I opened the door and walked out into the fresh morning air.

"Your hair's a mess." I said.

"And who's fault is that?" She laughed.

I ran my hands through the tangles.

"Careful, there's people about," she said.

We were both smiling like idiots in the morning sun. Until we came to where she had to go to her house and I had to go to Mr. Noseworthy's.

"See you in church?" I asked.

“Of course,” and she winked.

As I walked down the sidewalk, I felt like a million Ruperts. ‘Well,’ I told myself, ‘Now you really are a man.’ And I kept going over it again and again in my mind. I knocked on the door of the Noseworthy residence, and right away, there was Mr. Noseworthy, a look of profound confusion on his face. I was still grinning from ear to ear, but then remembered that this was serious business.

“Your wife’s okay. Don’t worry. She had to spend the night at the church because we all got attacked by wolves and she was bitten. But she’s okay. But we couldn’t leave.”

“What?” he said. He threw on his hat and jacket.

I guess he was really distraught, because I had to explain the whole thing to him a couple of times. When we got to the church, Mr. Noseworthy shook Father Wheelan’s hand with vigour.

“Thank you so much for taking care of my wife.”

“Oh...don’t mention it.”

By eleven, when it was time for the service, the church was packed. Everyone either heard the wolves, or they’d heard about them. Even Mr. Corwin was there. He and Beaver and Frank all stood at the back. I was sitting on a pew in the middle, close to where, well, you know. When Stormy and Mr. Greenwood came in, I waved them over.

“I saved a spot for us.”

Stormy gave me a sly smile. McMyrtle was with his parents a few rows up. He had no idea what had happened between Stormy and me. When I looked back, I saw that Travis and Naomi were here, which didn’t happen all the time. Father Wheelan came out. He went

through the prayers pretty quickly and he also gave a pretty short reading from the book. And then he closed the book.

“And now, I’d like to speak to you about a serious matter. A darkness has come over the town of St. Gaff’s. A darkness that lives on the edge of town. In the hills that surround us. Many of us heard the howling of wolves last night. I myself confronted one of these beasts last night. Right outside this very church. It attacked our own Mrs. Noseworthy and wounded her before I fought it off. We do not know where these wolves came from. I have heard the same rumours you have. But in the end, their provenance is irrelevant. The path forward is clear. This evening, all of the men will gather out by Gordon Gosse’s place. Arm yourselves. With rifles if you’ve got them, machetes and pitchforks. Whatever you can lay your hands on. Bring torches and lanterns. We will drive these things out tonight, before anyone else is hurt.”

“NO!”

Everyone turned to see Travis standing in the back row.

“These creatures cannot be defeated through ordinary means. They are a portent of something far worse that is about to befall this town.”

“Travis...settle down. They’re just dogs,” Wheelan said.

“They are not just dogs. Can’t you all see what’s happening here? The holes. The cracks in the ground, the wolves. These are all warnings. Something in our midst is drawing these things to us. You can’t just wade into the blackness in the hills. Men will be lost. We must drive out the cause of these things. I won’t name it here, but many of us know what that cause is. Confronting these beasts directly is a fool’s game.”

Then Mr. Noseworthy stood up.

“Those wolves attacked my wife. Who’s going to be next? A child? If it weren’t for Father Wheelan, who knows what would have

happened to my wife. We go tonight and we kill these things.”

“Mr. Noseworthy’s right,” Wheelan said, “we have no choice but to hunt these things down and kill them. As I said, we meet at sundown armed and ready. Just the men, of course.”

Wheelan kept talking and making plans, but Travis and Naomi got up and walked out as he was talking. Outside, after church, I was walking with Stormy and her dad when I heard Corwin.

“Milkmen. To me.”

I told Stormy and her dad I’d catch up and went over to where the milkmen were huddled. Corwin gave us our instructions.

“I want to see each and every one of you on those hills tonight. Armed. I suspect that these wolves have something to do with our...deeper purpose here.”

After that, on my way to the Greenwood’ place, I was wondering how I would arm myself. I was imagining blowing the wolves away with a big rifle, when Travis stopped me. Guess he’d been following me. Naomi wasn’t with him.

“I’m not quite sure what’s going on with you and the milkmen. But I think we both know who’s responsible for these wolves being here, and for all the other occurrences around town.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I know you’ve been going underground. You have to stop it. No matter what the milkmen tell you. If you keep going down there, you’re going to go mad. Or worse. And you’re risking the whole town.”

“Ok, Travis. I won’t go down there anymore.”

He looked at me uncertainly.

“Whatever they want you to do down there, it’s not worth it. They don’t know what they’re dealing with.”

Then he looked sort of wistfully up in the air.

“In church, they say prayers. But the gods...they’re not what most think they are.”

Then he looked at me hard again.

“Just stay out. Quit if you have to and find some other work. But you must stop going underground.”

“Okay, I’ll definitely stop going down there.”

But then I saw, a block away, Beaver standing on the corner and watching me and Travis.

“But now, I’ve got to go. Bye, Travis.”

Later, I was at the Greenwood’s place. Mr. Greenwood was tinkering with his breathing machine.

“I’m sorry that the radio didn’t work out, Howie. I had a suspicion that it would not be able to pick up commercial radio from Mingsbight. It’s a military radio, after all, and it’s meant to pick up short waves, not amplitude modulated signals. On the other hand, I think I’ve come up with a new application for this device. I’m thinking of calling it the Greenwood Underwater Breathing Apparatus!”

“That’s great, Mr. Greenwood.”

The rest of the afternoon, I spent with Stormy in the backyard, with tea and biscuits and lots of sly hints and jokes and smiles. We were happy. And before it was time for me to go join the milkmen in the hills, Mr. Greenwood presented me with an antique blunderbuss. It was a really old gun, like a rifle, but the barrel was flared at the end, sort of like a trumpet. He showed me how to load it with shot, but it seemed pretty complicated.

“My grandfather brought it home from the last war but one. I kept it in good working order.”

He wasn't going to go hunting for the wolves since he was still trying to keep a low profile.

I felt pretty good gathering with all the other men in Gosse's yard. I carried my gun with the barrel pointed down, since I knew that's the way you're supposed to do it. In case it goes off by accident. The sun was just getting ready to set. The trees with leaves had lost a bunch of their leaves, but a lot of the trees were pine. Not like the pines you'd see in a park in the city. These were all sorts of windswept and had greyish moss all over them. But in the woods, it looked weirdly dark. Everyone was there. Granard, Mr. Noseworthy, lots of the men on my route. Father Wheelan had a big torch and silver pistol. Most of the milkmen had pitchforks I guess they'd borrowed from some farmer. Corwin had a belt with two automatic pistols in it. But I felt pretty good with my ornate, large calibre weapon. Until I saw saw McMyrtle wander up the road with a brand-new Huntington semi-automatic rifle. Obviously, they sold those things in his parents' store, and he'd just taken one. But it still made my blood boil to see the idiot with such a nice gun.

Travis was there, too. But he just had a lantern like a lot of the others, and no weapon. He stood sort of apart from everyone with a worried look on his face. For everyone else, there was an excited atmosphere. I guess this was an interesting break from the humdrum everyday lives most of them led and being about to go out hunting with was fun for them in a way. Then, Wheelan cried out the instructions. His voice felt small in the outdoors.

"We'll form a line. Every man a few feet from the next. If you see anything, just cry wolf. Let's flush these monsters out for good."

So we all got in line. And quietly, we started up into the hills. McMyrtle was on one side of me, and Frank on the other.

“You sure you know how to use that thing, bud?”

“Sure I do!”

It was quite a sight to see all these men, farmers, townsfolk and milkmen with their lanterns and torches stretched out across the sparse forest at the base of the hill. It’s like there were magical glowing balls floating through the dead trees and the mist. Like the scenes from underground were happening on top now.

As soon as the trees got thicker, things became a bit strange. As we entered the darkness, it’s like the lanterns and torches just couldn’t shed their light very far. Like the light was fighting with the darkness or sucking it up somehow. One by one, the torches and lights in the distance went out. And it started to get harder and harder to see the ground, or the man next to me. But we could hear owls starting to hoot. And before long, we heard the wolves again too. There were shapes darting in and out of the darkness. I couldn’t tell if they were wolves or something else. Some were black and some seemed to be some sort of deep dark blue, but the colours were strange. Like they were negative colours somehow. Some of them just hovered in the air, like dim candles that gave off no light, hanging in the boughs of the trees. I somehow sensed that there were deep deep holes in the ground and that at any moment I might fall into one. And I felt off balance all the time.

And then, just ahead there was a wolf. I tried to call out, but the fog of blackness seemed to get into my mouth and I could hardly make a sound. I raised up my gun, but forgot what to do. I’d lost sight of McMyrtle a while ago, but Frank was still beside me. I could see that he was trying to call out too but couldn’t. But he came over and grabbed the gun out of my hand and fired it. It was all happening slower than was natural and the gun shot didn’t make much noise. And the wolf didn’t run away either. It just growled and ran towards us. My feet felt like they were in mud and I got separated from Frank, who still had my gun. I ran off and I ran, but I didn’t see

anyone around me. And I guessed I must have been going in the wrong direction. I found a lantern giving off hardly any light sitting at the foot of a pine tree that stretched up beyond where I could see. I picked up the lantern, but it didn't make a lot of difference.

The darkness was nearly complete. I couldn't see any more wolves, but I heard them all around me. And then I tripped and I must have slid down a hole, because the next thing I knew, I was in what must have been an underground cave. My lantern was giving off a bit more light down here. It was just drippy rock walls. Like a long corridor. I heard strange animal noises. They were scary and I was pretty scared myself. I thought I heard some snickering.

And then, right in front of me, there was a spooked looking young cow. I got close and tried to calm it down. It was black and white, with a strange red streak on its face.

“Hey buddy...how'd you get down here?”

It didn't seem afraid of me, and when I walked off, it followed me. It occurred to me that this might be a cow that would give us the phlogisterion we needed for the thermolizer and I decided to see if I could bring it with me back up to the surface. Maybe I hadn't shot any wolves, but to Corwin, this would be even more important.

As luck would have it, the tunnel was slanting up. And after a while, the cave ended in a strange room with a bunch of old mining equipment and a doorway. I didn't know if I was having an episode or if this was just the way things were. But I walked through the doorway and I was on the edge of the woods in the moonlight.

I went back in and discovered that the door was too small for the cow. But not by too much. I set down my lantern and picked up an old shovel that was on the ground. I hit the sides of the doorway until the wooden frame broke away. Bits of rock were crumbling down. The earth trembled a bit. After a while, I'd widened the

doorway a few inches. And I was able to coax the cow outside. There was no one around and the darkness wasn't so inky here. But then I heard Travis calling.

"Howie? Howie?"

The last thing I needed was for him to see me with a cow I'd brought up from underground. I ran back into the mining room and got some old rope. I did my best to tie up the cow to a tree and then ran towards Travis's voice, which was getting closer and closer.

"Travis! I'm here!"

"How are you always where you're not supposed to be?"

"What?"

"I saw you run off, with the wolves after you. A lot of the men are back from the hunt. Empty-handed, of course. I wanted to make sure you didn't get too lost."

"Thanks, Travis. Here, let's go this way."

"Why?"

"Isn't this the way back to town?"

"Yes. Gosse's place is just over this hill."

It was just normal moonlight now, but I made a mental note of where I'd tied the cow up. Luckily, it was a quiet animal.

"I don't want you going into these woods anymore, Howie. I'll take care of this myself. Understand?"

"Sure."

Eventually we came to where the rest of the men were. They all seemed a bit cowed since no one had gotten a wolf and I think everyone was a bit nervous to admit all the strange things they'd seen in the

woods. Some men were still out there. Corwin came up to me.

“Did you see McMyrtle out there?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“It’s too dark to go looking for him now. If he’s not back by morning, I’ll send Beaver and Frank. You may have to pull a double shift tomorrow if he’s not back.”

And without a lot more being said by anyone, we all dispersed and headed back into town. I got a few hours of sleep. I decided the cow would probably be fine until after my shift and there was no way I could be late if I had to do McMyrtle’s route in addition to mine. So I threw on my uniform, knowing this was going to be a big day for me. I was just getting into my truck when I heard Frank yell out,

“Hey! Everyone look!”

All the milkmen came out onto the street and Corwin came out of his office to see: a ragged and disheveled McMyrtle, walking down the street...with my cow with the unmistakable red mark on its face. McMyrtle was pulling it by the rope I’d used to tie it up.

“I found this underground,” he said.

And I could have killed him. Corwin walked to the cow and looked at the marking. I could see him trying to restrain the joy he was feeling.

“This is excellent work, McMyrtle. This is exactly what we’ve been looking for. I knew you had it in you. There’s a promotion in this for you.”

The peckerhead was beaming from ear to ear.

“But it’s my cow!”

I couldn’t resist. Corwin just gave me a baleful look.

“Coxwell. Aren’t you going to be late for your rounds? Albert’s

going to need to take the rest of the day off to rest. You'll be doing his rounds too."

I made my deliveries. Slamming down the milk bottles and ignoring all the chumps and down-and-outers around me in the lousy part of town. I was stewing and simmering with thoughts of revenge. What could I do? After everything I'd tried, now Corwin was going to be able to get the thermolizer working because he'd have a constant supply of phlogisterion supplied by a cow McMyrtle had supposedly found. And just when everything seemed to be going my way. I was desperate to think of some way that I could pull myself up from my imminent obscurity.

After all the deliveries, I was still as mad as hell. I went home and came face to face with that stupid radio that had let me down in my hour of need. I picked the stupid thing up and, even though it was pretty heavy, I dragged it all the way across town to Stormy's house. I was all sweaty because it was hard work. I knocked on the door and Stormy answered.

"Howie! What's wrong? How was the hunt? Why do you have the radio?"

I didn't even know where to start. I just barged in and carried the radio to Mr. Greenwood's workshop. He was in there. Still fiddling with the tubes of his Greenwood breathing machine. I just slammed the radio down on a shelf and tried to compose myself.

"Here. I can't use it. Maybe you can find a way to make the range extra long so we can hear something on it?"

"Oh...maybe Howie, I can try. But I'm not sure if..."

But I'd already stormed off.

"Howie? Howie? What's the matter?" Stormy called after me.

But I was still shaking with rage.

“I’ll be back in a bit. I have to go to the milk station.”

I banged on Corwin’s door.

“What is it, Coxwell?”

“I found it.”

“I don’t want to hear about the cow —“

“I’ve got incontrovertible evidence that Greenwood is a subversive. He’s got a contraband military radio in his workshop and it’s dialed into receive secret messages like the ones I used to send.”

Corwin’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. He slammed his fist against the wall.

“Got him. This is going to go down as one of the best days in the history of the department. Come with me. We’re getting inspector Piercey and you’re going to show him where this radio is.”

24. The Cow

Corwin and I were almost at the police station. I kept going over it inside my mind. We'd get the police, then go to Mr. Greenwood's house. I'd lead them to the workshop where the radio was. Mr. Greenwood would protest that it wasn't his and that I'd put it there. The police would tell him that possession was nine out of ten parts of the law and he was in possession of a contraband radio. Stormy would be standing there, confused, trying to piece it all together. There was no way she'd listen to reason, that McMyrtle was closing in on her father anyways and it was only a matter of time before Mr. Greenwood was arrested one way or another. And this way, I'd secured a future, for us. At the same time, I there was this queasy feeling in my stomach that was getting worse and I really wasn't feeling well at all. And then I just blurted out,

"Mr. Corwin, I can't go to the police or to the Greenwood place. I just can't. I'm sorry. Don't you remember that I asked if we could keep me out of it when we arrested him?"

He stopped and looked at me.

"You don't need me there," I continued, "The radio's in his workshop. You can't miss it. It's just sitting right out in the open. It's not hidden."

"All right, Howie. I know you have feelings for the man's daughter. But if I bring the police to the Greenhouse house and that radio's not there..."

I was absolutely shocked to hear that he suspected I was lying about the radio. What kind of idiot would lie about something like that?

“It’s there. I just put...saw him put it on the bench yesterday. I heard the station with a guy saying numbers and letters.”

He studied me a bit longer.

“Why don’t you go back to the station and help McMyrtle milk the cow. It was acting strangely when I left.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Corwin. And thank you.”

I turned on my heel and headed back to the station. For a split second I felt better that I wouldn’t have to face Stormy and her father. But then, almost right away, that horrible feeling came back to my stomach. I thought maybe I was just hungry since I hadn’t eaten all day, so I stopped at Granard’s and got a fish sandwich. Whenever I went to his shop, he gave me a solemn nod. It was like an understanding between us about the things we’d been through. He usually didn’t say much to me, but today he did.

“You tried Brixton’s Fish and Ships up the way?”

“No, I haven’t. Are they good?”

“Sure. Maybe you should go there from now on, Howie.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

It was nice of him to be looking out for me like that. And I should have been grateful that I had friends like him in town. But I just couldn’t shake the awful feeling in my gut. I took a couple of bites of the sandwich, and then just threw the rest out. I had no appetite. In fact, the bites of fish went down like a couple of lead balls. And then the balls turned into broken bottles that were grinding away at me. I tried to just walk it off. The sun was going down now and the streets were getting empty. All I could do was just keep walking.

And I couldn't quite shake the feeling that someone was following me. I could even hear the footsteps sometimes.

I felt like I'd done something really terrible. I tried to remind myself that I was just doing my job, but it didn't help. I knew somewhere deep down that I'd made a mistake. That I'd ripped something up that I shouldn't have ripped up and now I wish I hadn't. It's hard to really explain it. It started to dawn on me that I might never go inside the Greenwood house again. That he would be really disappointed in me. Especially after all the things he'd done to help me out. All the biscuits and tea, the fun conversations in the backyard. After taking care of me when I was hurt. Maybe I'd never see that wallpaper again.

But when I turned my mind to Stormy everything just sort of went black inside me. Like my brain was a rat in a cage trying to find some way to escape. Except that I knew that I'd somehow made the cage myself. When I thought about her sweet smile and her kisses, I could have kicked myself. I just couldn't figure out why I'd done it. I kept telling myself that Corwin had been demanding for months that I catch Mr. Greenwood. But I knew deep down that it was something else. And then I heard his voice behind me.

“You know why you did it.”

I turned and he was there. I couldn't move. He was just standing there. In the old brown suit. The only one he ever had. He probably wore it to his own funeral. But his face, I could hardly recognize in the dark. It was rotting, peeling. The teeth jeering at me, taunting. And all over his head were flies, buzzing, maggots crawling. But it was him and I knew it was him.

“You did it to hurt them. To rip them apart. The way you always do.”

“Wha...? No....”

“Oh yes. You destroy families. You can’t stand to see anyone happy.”

“It’s not true.”

I covered my face with my hands and almost clawed my eyes out so I wouldn’t see. But I couldn’t stop looking at it.

“It is true. You tore us apart. Do you even know what’s become of your mother? You couldn’t stand to see Greenwood and his daughter happy. You hate McMyrtle for the nice things his parents do for him. How normal they are. And now you’ve stolen a baby from its mother. Are you proud of yourself, Howie?”

I stammered. I couldn’t understand what he was talking about.

“I never...what baby?”

He laughed under his breath.

“You stole one of Mamifa’s children, Howie. You should have stayed underground. You should never have come up into the light.”

“No. It was a cow...an adult.”

He said nothing. I just heard the flies get louder. Then a gunshot rang out.

“What was that, Howie? The buller that went right through Greenwood’s old heart?”

I turned and ran, hyperventilating. I kept imagining Mr. Greenwood, on the floor of his workshop and bleeding. And Stormy screaming and the police and milkmen just standing there watching him. I didn’t stop running until I was on the pier, looking out to sea. The moons were rising. It was just a hallucination, I told myself. I was shivering now with sweat and the breeze coming off the water. It was just a dream, I told myself. A hallucination. It was just like shell shock. Id’ be okay. Just walk it off. So I walked and walked.

Along the water and then back up into the town with the pastel houses and the red stars glaring down at me. I didn't know where I was going. I was just trying to get away. But I couldn't get away from whatever was gnawing at my stomach. And now and again, I still heard the footsteps. The sound of flies. I could feel him behind me, but I couldn't look back. The branches of old trees in the moonlight looked like the legs of spindly spiders. Like they were just frozen there and waiting to drop down on my unsuspecting head and jab my eyes out.

Without really meaning to, I ended up in the poorer part of town. I passed by a small playground. It was lit only by a couple of gas lamps and the slide and swings were pretty old and rusty. It felt a bit damp and uncomfortable and sad, but I sat on a bench just to collect my thoughts and calm down. There was an old lady I hadn't seen on another bench. She was wrapped in a ratty old shawl and then, I was surprised to see that there was a grubby little girl with her, maybe four years old. She had on a little blue dress and a bonnet with some brown stains on it. It seemed very late for such a young kid to be out, but I didn't have kids, so what did I know.

I tried to forget my troubles and watched the girl playing. I cast my own mind back to the times I'd played in playgrounds like this. The girl had made a little castle out of sand and some tin cans. The sand was just a bit wet and perfect for sand castles. She was singing a little song to herself. I looked over to the old lady, who must've been her grandmother.

"It's so great to watch kids play. I think she's having a lot of fun," I said to the old woman.

The old lady looked like she was grinding her jaw and just mumbled something and gave a sort of blink, like she was trying to smile, but couldn't, or maybe she was just in some sort of pain. Then the girl was trying to balance a piece of wood on top of the castle

she'd made, but she couldn't quite get it to balance. In the end, she couldn't do it. The piece of wood fell and toppled one of the cans. And to my surprise, the girl got up, red faced with teeth bared and fists clenched. She kicked and stomped on the castle until there was not a trace that there had ever been a sand castle there. She got wet sand on the grandmother in the process. Then the girl looked to the old lady and started shrieking and then crying inconsolably. The grandmother tried to comfort the girl,

“Stop making that noise you stupid brat! Look at this mess!”

Eventually the old lady led the girl off, hopefully to sweet dreams. I just sat there, thinking about what I'd seen in a thoughtful sort of way. Why is it that kids destroy what they've made just when they're almost done? I guess they break things they care a lot about just to show everyone else how hurt they are and then luckily their parents are there to understand and make them feel better. The air was getting cooler and the breeze was going right through my uniform. So I got up and started walking again. And then I remembered that I was supposed to be at the milk station helping McMyrtle. Probably he'd figured everything out on his own and was gone, but I thought I'd better go see just in case. I didn't want him telling on me. I got that broken bottle in the guts feeling again as I walked. Watching the kid play, I'd forgotten for a few minutes what had happened. And now I just felt sick.

Then I smacked the side of my face. A fly was buzzing around. Then there was that old sound again. A swarm of them. I tried not to sink down even though I could feel myself falling. I gritted my teeth and forced myself to stay up here on the sidewalk. It felt like everything I'd been keeping down was gurgling up and out onto the street and that everyone would see. And then there was the sound of the other footsteps behind me. They'd been there a while, I think. And there was the awful snickering. I knew if I looked back, I'd see

him there. With the brown suit. His head just a silhouette of black buzzing flies with the glint of broken teeth.

“I always knew it, son. And now you know it too. You know what you are. You don’t deserve to be here. Just go back.”

I couldn’t stand it. I clenched my fists.

“First it was me. Then you killed Billings. Who’s going to be next, son?”

“I didn’t kill Billings!”

He just stood there laughing at me. I got so mad that I lunged at him - I punched him as hard as I could in the face - I felt the bone, wet and spongy with rot, his bottom jaw came away and hit the sidewalk. He just kept on laughing. His upper teeth mocking me. I turned and ran until I couldn’t hear his laughs. I caught my breath and I just kept walking. And then, with a pang of guilt, I remembered that I was supposed to be at the milk station helping McMyrtle out. I couldn’t even get that right. I put my head down and walked fast to the station.

Another gun shot rang out and reverberated around all the houses. Probably, like I said, McMyrtle had already figured out what to do with the cow and he’d gone back to his home. But I thought I’d better go see just in case. And anyways, I wanted to be around another human being.

It didn’t take me too long to get to the station. As I passed the parking lot I reminded myself again about closing up that hole. But I was really glad to see the light was still on in the station. The door was open. That was a bit strange, but you know McMyrtle. He can be pretty forgetful. So I went down the hall, thinking that I could just forget my problems for a minute and help out McMyrtle, who apparently hadn’t figured out how to milk a cow in all this time.

They were keeping the cow in the room with the thermolizer,

and when I opened the big doors, I was really confused by what I saw. I didn't know where to look first. The first thing I saw was the cow. It was turning brown and leathery. It still had the old rope around its neck. It was halting and stumbling around the room. Shaking. There were bumps bubbling up on its head. It was making noises like it was really struggling. It was pretty scary and awful. I, at least was sort of used to this kind of thing, but then I saw McMyrtle cowering behind the thermolizer..

“Howie! The cow! I'm trapped!”

“Come out. It's not going to attack you.”

“What's wrong with it?”

“Come on, you said you found it underground. You know the things from underground don't belong up here.”

Slowly, he crept out. We stood a few feet away from the thing as it kept on groaning and bubbling.

“I've just...never seen one. I know they act strangely, but I thought this was just a cow.”

“I thought you said you found it underground?”

“Well, can you keep a secret? I actually found it tied up to a tree. But it looked like the one Mr. Corwin told me to get. And I thought, with all the strangeness happening that night, maybe it did come from underground.”

“You know, I probably would have thought the same thing. But you never know how these underground things are going to act. I've seen them before, you know.”

“Well, what should we do?”

“You have to milk it! And you'd better do it quick. Who knows what's going on with it.”

“Milk it?”

“Didn’t Corwin tell you he wanted the phlogesterion?”

“Yes....but...”

“Well, I think he told you to milk it. Right? He’s gonna be pretty upset with you if you don’t.”

“I don’t know how to milk a cow. And...look at it!”

“Suit yourself.”

I turned and headed for the door.

“Wait. Howie. Help me?”

I stopped.

“Help you how?”

“Well, I don’t know anything about milking cows.”

“Oh, it’s easy. Just grab the pail. There you go. It’s not moving around as much. Get down. Right behind it. Just...gently...okay...reach in between its legs...there...just grab...and pull.”

And that’s when the cow thing howled and kicked. And it kicked McMyrtle right in the head. He flew back and was lying there on the floor. I ran over to him. He had a horrible gash across his face and it was bleeding. But he was still breathing. The cow was just struggling with its own problems on the other side of the room.

“Albert, you okay?”

He just looked at me through all the blood and he didn’t look very good.

“Hang on.”

I grabbed some paper towels and poured some water on them

from the sink on the wall. I went back and wiped off the blood as best I could from his face. He kept opening and closing his eyes slowly and didn't say anything. I thought about dragging him out of the room, but he was too heavy. So I just propped him up so he was sitting against the wall.

“Hey, Albert. I'm gonna go get the doctor, okay? Just keep your eyes open. Here's some paper towels to wipe the blood if you can.”

As I left the station, this feeling started to well up inside me. I couldn't stand McMyrtle, but the idea of going to get the doctor to help him now that he was hurt made me feel sort of heroic. I don't think I'd ever felt that feeling before. The words of the magician came back to me.

“With one decent act, you can redeem yourself.”

It occurred to me that maybe I'd gotten the magician all wrong. He seemed like my enemy, but maybe in some strange way, he was really trying to help me. To show me the way. It felt as though everything in my life was coming to this sharp pinnacle right now. And I had a chance to set right all the things I'd done wrong. The moons and the stars must have all been aligned just the right way for me, because right as I came out of the station, up the block a ways, there were the police and Mr. Corwin and Beaver and Frank. And there was Mr. Greenwood, in handcuffs and looking very sad, but, thankfully with no bullet holes at all in him. And there was my beloved Stormy, struggling with the fat cop I hadn't seen for a while. And she was screaming,

“Let him go! It wasn't him!”

And she looked so beautiful in that moment, with her hair all tussled and her face red. And I knew what I had to do. I knew that despite the mistakes I'd made, I could set it all right, at this moment, right here. Like a thunderbolt, I understood that there was nothing more important than me and Stormy and what we had together. I just

hoped I wouldn't be too late.

I ran back into the station. Into the room where the thermolizer was and the cow and poor McMyrtle. The cow had changed. There were weird misshapen eyeballs protruding from its head. Four of them. And it was all oily with reddish ooze and there were horrible bumpy things moving under its skin, trying to get out. But I wasn't afraid. I grabbed the rope that was around the cow's neck and I pulled and pulled until the thing started coming with me. I pulled it as fast as it would go, until I got it just to the door. The police and Corwin were just about at the station. I was swept up feeling like one of those heroic soldiers who leads the charge of battle and sacrifices himself for his fellows. For I knew that with this one act, I was going to change my life forever. I pulled the cow out onto the sidewalk. And then. I set the cow free.

And right on time, it let out this horrifying scream. And everyone on the sidewalk stopped and stared. Waves of elation came over me as I shouted,

"It got loose!"

"Dear God!" Inspector Piercey cried.

He drew his pistol and shot several times. One bullet hit the cow and it screamed again. It was ear piercing. And the cow charged at the police. They all drew their guns. Corwin shouted,

"No! Don't shoot it!"

But they fired anyways. Frank and Beaver pushed two of the police so they'd miss and in the confusing situation, Mr. Greenwood and Stormy ran off down a side street. And I ran after them. I heard, behind me, Piercey shouting.

"You two, after them. We've got the cow."

I ran as fast as I could to catch up with them.

“They’re after us,” I said.

“Down that way. I’ll distract them.”

They hardly looked at me, but they ran down the road on the left I’d told them to go down. I was elated. I was finally setting things right and I couldn’t believe the feeling. The cops showed up half a minute later. The fat one and the thin one.

“They went down there!” I shouted, pointing to the right.

And they fell for it too. It’s amazing to me how trusting some people can be. Back in the direction of the station, I heard the cow scream again. Maybe they’d got it. Who knows. When the cops were far enough, I turned the way Stormy and her father had gone. I caught up with them not too long after. Mr. Greenwood turned out to be in pretty good shape and wasn’t wheezing or anything. We were not too far from their house.

“They made me do it. I had no choice.” I tried to explain.

But they were too scared and preoccupied to really notice. There were no police at the house.

“I’ve got to get these handcuffs off. Howie, you wait here and shout if anyone comes.”

“Stormy!” I said.

But she just ran inside without looking at me.

So there I was, standing guard. I could hear a commotion going on a few blocks away. And then Beaver walked up behind me. I hardly knew he was there until the last second and he startled me.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Oh! Beaver,” and I said it really loud as if I was totally surprised so that Stormy and her father would hear, “I’m just standing guard. You

know what they say about criminals always returning to the scene of the crime.”

“Uh huh. Did you look inside?” And he started for the door.

“No! It’s private property, we can’t just walk right in.”

But that’s exactly what he did. The door wasn’t locked. I followed him in.

“Anyone home?” I shouted, again, loud so that they’d hear.

“There!” Beaver grunted.

And he pointed out the back window, where I just caught a glimpse of the door to the back fence closing.

“Come on,” Beaver said, and we ran out after them.

Out on the street, I heard again the screaming cow. It was louder and more horrible now. Then we both heard screaming. Human screams. Beaver and I ran in the direction Stormy and her father had gone, but the ground felt unsteady and then we both tripped on a broken piece of sidewalk that had somehow popped up in front of us. We just saw Stormy and Mr. Greenwood in the distance, running in the direction of the harbour. So we got up and ran too. The next few minutes were a blur. There was more screaming, Inspector Piercey and the thin cop were running beside us. I saw, on the pier the silhouette of Mr. Greenwood and Stormy in the moonlight. On the edge of the water. Two cops were there and Mr. Corwin too. I was running. But I was too late.

One cop raised his gun and fired three times into Mr. Greenwood, who fell backwards into the harbour.

Stormy screamed and it was the only sound I could hear. And then I was there beside her.

“Oh my God, Stormy...”

She looked at me, and the revulsion in her eyes brought everything in my world crashing to the ground.

“Get away from me.”

As I stood there looking at her, with her looking at me with disgust in her eyes, the ground started to shake and there was this terrible sound.

What happened next is probably why you’ve heard of St. Gaff’s.

25. Full Circle

The two cops were looking into the harbour.

“He never came back up!” The first one said.

“I guess he sank to the bottom... What’s that?”

There was a terrible cracking noise and the ground shook. But then it stopped and there was only this eerie quiet after. Someone shouted,

“It’s an earthquake!”

I’d been looking right at Stormy’s face. She looked scared when the ground was moving, but as soon as it was still, her eyes filled up again with hate. And my beloved Stormy, who once did seek me out, fled from me, running down the pier. I made a move to chase her, but Frank grabbed my shoulder.

“Just let her go, bud. Just let her go. If it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be.”

I thought about the wisdom of what he said as I watched her disappear back into the town. Her shiny hair shining in the moonlight. Then the police went back to staring at the water in the harbour.

“Well?” Corwin asked.

“He ain’t come up, mister.”

“Don’t matter. Less he can breath underwater...heheh.”

“Fine. Coxwell. What happened with the cow?”

“I think it’s still loose, sir!”

“I know that. How did it get loose?”

“It was McMyrtle. The cow kicked him and. He was hurt and I had to get the cow out of there.”

Corwin opened his mouth and I could tell he wasn’t about to have anything nice to say. But he just stopped and I think we all sensed that something was wrong. There was a rustling of little wings and I felt a gentle breeze on my face. A fly. It was about twice the size of a normal house fly. It flew right past me and landed on Corwin’s cheek. He slapped it off in disgust. Mr. Corwin always hated flies. Then there was a low vibrating, buzzing sound. And some awful muffled laughter. It was my dad again, lumbering down the harbour. He was all puffy and stuffed like a scarecrow and he couldn’t walk very well. He seemed bigger. And the buzzing was coming from him. He was laughing a revolting laugh. His jaw was back on his head now.

“Well done, my boy! I see you’ve brought some friends with you!” He said with the magician’s voice.

He stretched out his arms towards us. There were flies spewing out of his sleeves and shirt. The police ran. The milkmen did not.

“Take it down,” Corwin commanded.

Beaver and Frank clenched their fists and walked towards the laughing thing. But I...I was filled with so much rage and hate, that I lunged at it first, clawing at it’s laughing face, my fingers sinking into the mass of bugs and rotting cartilage. Beaver tried to grab it, but my father struck out with his arm and knocked Beaver right over the edge and into the water.

“Get him on the ground, Howie!” Frank shouted.

And he threw himself against me and the thing, knocking it to the ground. We heard, from the water,

“There’s bodies down here!”

I’d never heard Beaver sounding so animated. On the ground, I was horrified at the sensation of a million flies crawling in and out of my mouth and nose, into my ears and over my eyes. I could feel every little leg every little squirt of acid. I tried to brush them off, but as soon as I took my hands off of my dad, he gave a tremendous push and threw Frank and me off onto the concrete. And it got back his feet. Frank was trying desperately to brush the flies off, just like me. Corwin, who’d been standing by, decided to take matters into his own capable hands. He put his hands around the thing’s neck and squeezed. I took a step towards it. But before I could get further, the thing opened its mouth and a jet of thick brown mucus spewed out onto Corwin’s face. Corwin stepped back, stunned. His fortitude was astonishing as he scraped the stuff off his face and eyes. His nose was plugged, and his mouth was open, gasping for air. Frank ran to Corwin and used his sleeve to try to clean his face off. Rage welled up inside me. This thing that had been haunting me was now hurting my friends. I flew at the monster with both fists, but it just dispersed into a cloud of flies. A cloud so thick, I could hardly see. It was deafening. The ground started shaking again. I ran to get out, waving my arms in front of me to see, but I couldn’t see at all. I ran down the harbour. The flies thinned out a bit, and I was close to the shipyard.

The hull of the ship was lit up from inside with thousands of little lights, like hovering little candles, fireflies. As I watched, surrounded by flies, I saw the first flames that would illuminate this now infamous night, and destroy the ship the people of St. Gaff’s had spent months building. The great ship that would never be launched. I stood, transfixed, as if untouched by the chaos unfolding around me, knowing that I was somehow at the centre of it all.

Swarms of flies hovered over the town and there was something wrong with the houses. There was a horrible sinking feeling. The comforting symmetry of the houses was broken. Some of the rooftops were sticking out at strange angles, or sunken down, like a perfect mouth after someone had punched some of the teeth out. The flies made it hard to see, and between the moonlight and the conflagration burning behind me, illuminating the bugs in strange lights, it seemed like everything I'd seen beneath the earth had been vomited up to the surface.

As I watched the plague of insects enveloping my new home town, I could just barely make out, above the swarms, something moving, towering and red. It moved like a knee joint. The giant red bones of a dead cow stomping. I saw the glint of a horn in the sky. A fly landed on my lip and I slapped it off and when I looked back, the bones were gone, either back into the depths of my imagination or back underground. Then this terrible fear gripped me: Stormy might still be out on the street somewhere.

I started into town, I tried to run, but it was like I was stuck in mud and moving slower than everything around me. I couldn't get my legs going fast enough and I could tell that the flies were catching up. That he was catching up. It wasn't far to my building, but when I got there, I was shocked to find the front door locked. I didn't even know there was a lock. I stood back and shouted up,

“Mrs. Sommertag! It's Howie! Open the door!”

I had to cup my hands to keep the flies out. I stepped back so I could look up. The only face I saw, a few floors up, was the little boy. But right away, I saw his mother there in the window. She looked down at me, scared, and then just pulled the curtains.

“Mrs. Sommertag!”

And then my neighbour poked her head out the window. I could see the flies pouring in.

“Howie?” I heard her say.

“Close that window right now! Are you crazy?”

Then a pair of arms pulled my neighbour back in and there was Mrs. Sommertag closing the window, giving me a nasty look and then she too closed the curtains.

“Mrs. Somertag! It’s Howie! Let me in!”

Then I heard the awful laughing. I turned and the old brown suited fly head was there. He had a broken bottle and was lurching towards me. I ran as best I could through the clouds of insects. There was no one on the street. Further into town, I tried a couple of doors of people who were on my route. All locked. No one came to the door. I didn’t even try Mrs. Noseworthy’s house. I had to avoid new sinkholes that had opened. Inside them, there was just a black yawning darkness. Darker than just underground darkness. Mr. Greenwood’s house was locked up tight and there were no lights on inside.

“Stormy?!! Stormy?”

She didn’t answer, which I expected. I hoped she was in there. But there was more laughing, and bugs and I had to get going. I kept running, catching glimpses of my father here and there. He seemed to be around every corner, and always behind me. I got to the business part of town. I went to Granard’s place. I knew he’d help me out after everything we’d been through. I banged on his door and I was sure I saw lights on inside. But no one came to help me.

I ran further down the street. I couldn’t see many lights behind the windows, but every light I did see seemed to go off as I passed. Like some awful darkness was following me. I thought I heard locks clicking and shutters slamming everywhere I went. I looked up to the moon for help, but it was blotted out by clouds of flies that went way up into the sky.

Then, Mrs. Pyman came running out of an alleyway. It was horrible. She was grabbing at her neck and there was blood everywhere. Then I saw...she pulled a long piece of glass out of her neck. It was from a brown bottle like my dad had. I tried to get her to stop, but she couldn't speak and just kept running. I could feel his presence and every time I stopped, the flies got thick around my face. No one answered at Dr. Barrett's. He was probably out helping someone. It was getting hard to run on the streets since they were getting covered in thick white slugs. Eventually I made it to the church. I pounded on the door. And. Thank the whaler. Father Wheelan opened up and pulled me in. Then slammed the door shut.

"Good God, Howie, what were you doing out there?"

"I was in the harbour when it started. No one would let me in."

"So these flies are everywhere?"

"Everywhere...all over the town. A lot of houses have fallen in. There's more of those holes"

"I have to make a phone call. You wait here."

And he shuffled to the steps of the tower. I started shaking from cold, or maybe just from everything that had happened. But then something horrible occurred to me. Maybe Stormy hadn't gotten home. Maybe she went to the milk station looking for me so I could defend her and help her. I burst out of the church and back onto the street.

I slipped on the slugs a couple of times, but eventually made it to the milk station. It was cracked all over. Billy on the wall was mostly destroyed. My old friend was just a pile of rubble, except, on the bit of wall that still stood, one of Billy's eyes staring accusingly at me. Beyond, I could see that one wall had collapsed and I could see the thermolizer chugging away.

I passed the parking lot of the milk station. Had all of this happened because I forgot to cover up the hole? I looked over and couldn't really see what was going on over there. Although if anything, the flies were less thick around here. But then the station door opened. McMyrtle came stumbling out clutching his head. His face was all white and pale, except for all the blood, and there were bugs crawling around in the blood. I went up to him.

“Hey, Albert. Are you okay?”

He stared blankly at me.

“Howie? Is that you?”

“Is Stormy inside? Did she come here?”

He just kept staring. He obviously had no idea what I was talking about. I guess the cow had kicked him pretty hard. I grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back towards the station. But he was frozen on the spot. The flies were gathering around us.

“Come on, let's get inside.”

Then I turned and saw what he was looking at. The cow. Without any regular skin anymore. It was glowing red like a glowing piece of coal. Its eyes were bright orange and evil. It snorted and ran at us. I ran and Albert still had enough sense to run with me. We ended up in the parking lot. Our backs against a milk truck and the furious cow in front of us. I thought about my father and how I'd fought back. And I thought in that split second, that maybe I could fight off the cow, too. I was terrified, but there was also this rage inside me, telling me I couldn't go on being pushed around by everything that tries to pull me down.

The cow looked like it was about to charge at us again. I took a step forward. It did a short charge at us and tried to gore us with its horns. I reached out to grab the horns and pull its head away. One

hand got a horn. But my other hand somehow slipped and ended up in the thing's mouth. As fast as I could, I pulled my hand back, but the thing bit down hard. It had my ring finger in its teeth.

I looked into its eyes and saw a horrifying orange intelligence there as it slowly but surely bit through my finger. I could feel the bone coming out of its socket. I screamed but I was so shocked and wound up, I barely felt anything. I fell back against the truck looking at the stump. And I was sure the cow thing was smiling a grotesque cow smile at me. I was bleeding everywhere, and the flies were gathering around the blood.

"Howie. Your finger," McMyrtle said.

I wondered if the peckerhead's idiotic statement would be the last voice I ever heard on this earth as the cow got ready to attack again.

And then, out of the clear night sky, there was a blinding flash of lightning and a peal of thunder. In the flash I saw him. On the roof of the milk station. A huge dark figure in a long black whaleskin coat. I saw the beard. The sharp blue eyes. It was Travis. He wore a great horned helmet and at his side was a harpoon that must have been ten feet long. The harpoon's bone blade was long, and emitted a nearly blinding green light. In an instant Travis drew back and hurled the weapon. It sailed through the air and penetrated the back of the cow's head and I watched the thing's eyes go out like a candle. The cow slumped to the ground black as coal.

"Howie. Take the harpoon," Travis shouted.

I looked up at him and he pointed towards the hole.

"Take it now!"

I saw some large shape trying to pull itself out of the hole in the ground. I felt this strange feeling come over me and somehow I knew, for the first time in my life, that I was in control, never mind

all the chaos around me. I pulled the harpoon out of the carcass. It was light in my hands even without my finger and even though it was so long and felt like it was made of iron. The flies seemed to steer clear of the blade. With its light, I could see, the man in the brown suit, now larger than life, trying to crawl up out of the hole. I knew what to do, but I stopped when I saw my father's face, drunk and slurring. But his body was huge. A giant bubbling blob trying to force its way up.

“Help me up outta here?”

For a moment, I thought maybe I owed it to the old man to help him out of the hole, since it was probably my fault he'd fallen in there.

“Howie!” Travis yelled.

I turned and watched him jump from the roof of the station down onto the ground without even stumbling. He ran at me.

“That's not your father. Kill it. Now!”

I turned. Travis was right. I didn't owe it a thing. I raised the harpoon and I drove it down into its face. All at once, it seemed to explode into a geyser of green.

I fell back, blinded by the force of a green shockwave. I learned later that the wave spread out across the town, and the flies and bugs and other things all dropped dead as it made its way across St. Gaff's. But there in the parking lot, Travis and McMyrtle and I just stood and watched as the geyser of bright green steam shot up higher and higher into the sky. It was like a million hypnotic beads of light and mist. It made hardly any sound, and it was strangely calming to watch the plume rising up and up.

And it was that night that all the stars turned from red to green.

No one knew at the time, but the geyser would keep going all through the fall and winter and didn't stop until the spring. Later, wealthy people and scientists would come to St. Gaff's to look at the geyser and to try and figure it out. I had some vague recollection of leaving the geyser and showing up at Dr. Barret's. I recalled wrinkles forming on his forehead when I told him a cow did it. But he'd cleaned and burned the wound on my finger, which I still could hardly feel, and then he bandaged it up.

After that, when the sun was coming up, I went to my building. The door was open now. And Mrs. Somertag looked like she'd swallowed a goldfish when she saw me.

"Why didn't you let me in?"

"Oh sorry, Howie, I didn't know it was you out there! Hard to see with all the flies, you know. But you're okay now? Everything fine?"

I went up to my room. The door was open and a lot of my stuff had been thrown around or was missing. Strange. But I grabbed my pipe that I'd gotten from Mr. Greenwood and some tobacco that was still there and headed to the harbour. I just sat there for a long time, watching the sun come up.

Then, at about nine o'clock in the morning, I was sitting in the ruins of the shipyard smoking my pipe and trying to piece together what had happened. It was all just shattered bits of memory that came back in bits. It was a bright and cool morning with no clouds, and the sun made everything sharp and clear. I was still getting used to not having a ring finger. I learned later that Walker, the old milkman had been killed. Trampled to death by some unknown beast. There were a few other deaths from people falling into the holes. Some had choked to death on the flies. A couple of the deceased were on my old route. Mrs. Pyman had bled to death and they found her close to where her husband got dumped into the

water. Corwin asked me what had happened. Travis was nowhere to be seen. I tried to explain, but couldn't really make any sense.

It was that morning, as I sat there on a concrete block smoking my pipe, that the men from the geological survey came. I watched as the ferry pulled in, much earlier than usual. And all the men in black uniforms from the geological survey ran out and started roping off the holes and the geyser. Later that day, they called a town meeting and their leader explained that there'd just been an earthquake that had released an underground colony of cave flies. But all the strange things everyone had seen, the giant skeletal cow, the witches some said they's seen, those were all hallucinations induced by the strange gases the earthquake had released. When Granard, whose chipper had burned to the ground in the night by the way, stood up and asked how it was that we'd all seen the same things, the geological man, who knew a lot about science, explained that it was pretty common for whole groups to have these culturally induced hallucinations. We'd all grown up with stories about the evil things that lived underground, but no rational person now believed that there was anything evil down there. Just pockets of gas and the odd creature we hadn't gotten around to classifying yet.

The townsfolk more or less went along with the explanation, not wanting to sound like hillbillies in the face of such an erudite man from Mingsbight. But the men from the geological survey weren't the only ones on the ferry that morning. After they'd gotten off, the big black car I'd seen so long ago drove off the boat. It was the man from the Department of Lactic Affairs. He stopped to talk to me when he saw my uniform.

"Are you injured?"

"Lost a finger."

"Lost in the line of duty?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good for you son. You’re a real milkman now. No one can ever take that away from you.”

Then he told the driver to go to the milk station and drove off. My heart swelled with pride. Corwin was right. Being a milkman really was a vocation. And last night, I’d heard the call loud and clear.

Then, in a flash I remembered last night, standing there beside the geyser with Travis beside me. And everything he’d said came back to me and I understood it finally. I was a Seeker. I’d been plagued all my life by the things that wanted me to go back underground. I’d done a lot of bad things in my life. But I had not killed Billings. I had not killed my father. Now that I understood that I was a Seeker and could do amazing things, I knew that I could be a really useful part of the Department. Maybe I’d even get Stormy back when she realized how amazing I was. I thought about Travis and how he’d always wanted to talk to me about being a Seeker and how I never really wanted to talk about it. I bet he knew a lot of things he could teach me. I bet I’d be the only milkman Seeker.

When I walked back into town, the townsfolk were already getting busy sweeping up the dead flies and things with brooms. Sometimes I wondered at them and wished I could be one of those people who just automatically set about tidying up and making sure everything was where it should be. There was Mr. Noseworthy, shovelling the dead things into a wheelbarrow. If I didn’t know better, I’d say there was a little hint of a smile on his face and I thought I heard him humming a tune. He looked up at me.

“Morning, Howie. You made out okay last night?”

I sort of nodded and tried to smile, but kept walking. I passed the barber cleaning his shop window. He looked over at me.

“Quite the commotion last night.”

I saw Granard near the chipper. When he saw me, he just looked at the ground and hurried inside. The people of the town were just like ants or worker bees and it never occurred to them to do anything but what they were supposed to do. I knew now that all my hopes of having a house and normal life with Stormy were just imaginary visions in my dreams that would never come true. I'd never spend my days puttering around in the garden or repainting my porch. And as much as I'd daydreamed about these things, it struck me like a clock bell: I would never be like them, and I didn't even want to be.

I walked on and my heart froze when, right around Mercy and Grand, I saw my beloved Stormy sitting on her broken porch staring blankly at her rose bushes. All covered in gunk and dead flies. She hadn't done anything to clean the place up. She just turned her face away from me. I'd just been about to say something. But I just closed my mouth and walked on. I knew that talking to her right now was a bad idea. But I held on to the hope that maybe one day I'd convince her that this had all been for the best.

I felt that I'd grown a lot since coming here. I'd learned a lot about life and love. I thought about reading Eliza Pike with Stormy. Telling her about how I wanted to live with her in some out of the way place raising rabbits and other animals. And I remembered, too, how she didn't like that idea at all and that she wanted to live a more adventurous life. If nothing else, I knew that I'd helped make sure that she wouldn't live an ordinary life.

I was really exhausted, but this was war and I decided to go to the milk station to see if there was anything I could do, and if I could catch any of what the man from the department and Corwin were talking about.

When I did get back to the station, I marveled at the stream of green that went up as far as the eye could see. But I pulled myself

away when I remembered why I'd come. Inside, I just caught a few words between the man and Corwin. Something about retrofitting the thermolizer for a new kind of fuel. I was astonished at their determination. They weren't giving up even though their efforts had nearly destroyed the whole town. When they noticed me hanging around, Corwin turned to me.

"Howie, you were there when this happened? When the geyser erupted?"

"I was."

"And how exactly did it happen?"

"I'm not completely sure, Mr. Corwin. I was with McMyrtle and we were fighting with the cow and it bit off my finger. And then, I don't know. There was just this geyser coming up out of the ground."

"Hmm. We've heard that Travis was there."

"He might have been...it's all a bit hazy for me."

"You've spent some time with Travis, is that right?"

"Yes, sir he's on my route. Or he used to be."

"Well, McMyrtle's got some recuperating to do, so why don't you go back to your old route for now."

"Thank you, Mr. Corwin."

Then he straightened up.

"The town's suffered a great tragedy. But this is war, and we have a duty to continue delivering milk. We will redouble our efforts to clear the town of vermin. You take the rest of the day off. But you'll be back here first thing in the morning. I want you to speak with Travis. Find out what he knows about last night's events. I have a suspicion he might be useful to us."

“Yes, sir. You mean you think he’s a subversive?”

“No, Howie, I don’t think so. You just ask him, subtly, about last night and let me know what he says.”

The next morning, driving out along the coast road just before dawn, my thoughts were racing. I was a little concerned. What if they figured out that Travis really was a Seeker after all. Maybe they planned to recruit him to be a milkman in some high up position. Then they wouldn’t need me any more. I had to figure out how to let them know that I was the only Seeker and the only one who could really help them. I’d have to handle this situation with a lot of care.

As I was driving, a muskrat started walking across the road. I grabbed the steering wheel.

Epilogue

One sunny morning in St. Gaff's, a mailman was making his deliveries.

"Good morning Mrs. How's your day going so far?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Wonderful. Special expedited delivery for you."

Then, down at the church.

"Here you are Father Wheelan. Got a couple of big packages here for you. Special delivery from the mainland."

"Oh boy! I've been waiting for these!"

At the milk station the boys looked a little tired.

"Hello you two. How's the milk business today?"

"Fuck off...we're hung over here."

"I'll just leave these here for you."

Then the mailman found himself around Mercy and Grand. He knocked on the door of a peculiar looking house.

"Anybody home?"

But since no one answered, a helpful neighbour poked her head out.

"Who are you looking for, dear?"

“Oh hello. It’s for one Stormy Greenwood. Quite a stack of envelopes for her.”

“She’s moved away not too long ago. Nobody lives in there now.”

“Ah, I see. We’ll have to check if there’s a forwarding address.”

Later, at the post office, the mailman looked up the new address. He smiled to himself when he found it.

“Ah, here we are: Stormy Greenwood 3 Mercy Street. Forward to 42b Tootingham street, Mingsbight, LSM 2K5.”

Then, a couple of days later, a different mailman with the same stack of letters knocked on the door of a little row house.

“Here you are, miss. Quite a backlog. Mostly from the patent office, I see. This one’s got no return address on it.”

But the young woman who collected the mail was just on her way out and simply deposited the envelopes on the side table. Then, later still, the envelope with no return address was opened.

My Dear Stormy,

I’m very sorry that I wasn’t able to get a letter through until now. I can imagine that it must have been very difficult for you after that night. But I wanted to let you know that I’m safe. I’ve made a request for you to join me, but permission was denied because you are no longer a minor. You should by now have received the first of the royalty cheques. We have here, of course, secret channels to the patent office and to the major banks both in Tow Law and abroad. You will continue to receive royalties from all my past inventions until they become public domain. But that will not occur for many decades in some cases. As you shall see, you will have enough to live comfortably in St. Gaff’s if you’re careful.

My little girl, I'm so very sorry to say that we will probably never see each other again. But I am consoled somewhat by the knowledge that my trifling inventions will provide a means of support for you in my absence. As you can see from the postage stamps, this letter was sent from Zamaluk and likely took several weeks to get to you. Elkhorn, as you may know, allows no communication, personal or otherwise, with Tow Law or Weyland, preferring instead to conduct its trade overseas. I was able to convince one of our mariners to send this letter to you from abroad. If you're reading this, you must still have the decoder ring I gave you many years ago and told you never to lose.

But, you are probably wondering what exactly happened that night. After Howie deposited that radio with me and considering the state he was in when he did so, I began to wonder if perhaps he was being manipulated somehow by the milkmen.

I know you are very fond of him, Stormy, but, as I've tried to tell you before, I worry that he may be lacking in moral fibre. I'd been making a nuisance of myself to the milkmen, and it occurred to me that Howie might have left the radio with me after being pressured to do so by his superiors. Please do not take offence, but I doubt very much that Howie could have devised such a scheme on his own.

Once again, I know your feelings for him, and I understand the allure of a worldly ruffian from the big city. But I do hope that you will one day find a man with a better head on his shoulders. And, I venture to add, a firmer understanding of personal hygiene.

I will not relate the events surrounding our arrest or subsequent escape. Suffice it to say, the personal defense undergarments I'd been working on, and which we had time to slip on before the milkmen arrived proved successful. As did the small canister of oxygen and breathing mask I'd been working on for Dr. Barrett. I

have since developed it into the Greenwood Underwater Breathing Apparatus, or, GUBA, as I like to call it. This is my first contribution to my new home in Elkhorn.

In any case, I was not badly hurt by the policemen's bullets and, with the weight of my metal infused shirt I was able to stay beneath the waves, put on my mask and breathe underwater long enough to swim to the far end of the harbour. I pulled myself out and was able to remain concealed until I arrived at the gas filling station on the edge of town. In the distance, I heard the commotion and eventually saw the geyser, which, you may or may not know, has in fact altered the colour of the stars around the globe. In Elkhorn we are in more regular communication with the most distant lands than we are with our own continental neighbours, and every returning ship brought word of the newly verdant stars.

You may recall almost a year ago, we went north to Skaw to visit your aunt, after your other aunt passed away. You may also remember that while we were there, I went on a long walk by myself. I had planned to meet with a representative from Elkhorn and I met with him during this walk. He gave me instructions and we discussed the possibility of my eventually emigrating. In any event, after sneaking into the filling station, warming up, drying off and helping myself to a few snacks, which, it goes without saying, I duly paid for afterwards, I made my way on foot to Skaw. Your aunt, my sister-in-law, welcomed me and allowed me to stay and recuperate for several days. She is not doing well since my sister's death. Perhaps you could take the time to visit her now and again, as I'm sure that seeing you would brighten her spirits.

I will not bore you with the details of my journey. How I was able to transmit my intention to flee to Elkhorn, the vessel that took me across the channel, the network of safe houses that led me north across the lines of battle into Weyland's northern wastes, and my eventual

arrival at a barn that housed, to my astonishment, an underground train station, and then the journey onboard the train that lasted two nights and a day. The train, of course, did not run very deep beneath the ground, and was built mainly to traverse the mountains that surround Elkhorn and cut it off from the rest of the continent. I must admit that over the course of my flight, I was in a state of constant and extreme trepidation. My guide, a brilliant young fellow who was able to blend in anywhere, assured me that this was a well-worn path and that I had nothing to worry about. But I saw milkmen and the police in every shadow. I do not believe that I ever slept so well as I did on that underground train.

I will relate to you my astonishment at first arriving in Elkhorn. From the train station on the other side of the mountains, there was a sort of motorized taxi boat that carried us through the canals of the lagoon. The stories we've all heard are true. About the enormous, twelve story buildings jutting up out of the water. I myself now occupy a very spacious apartment on the eleventh floor of one of these. There is plenty of light from the tall windows, and the upper part of the windows are ringed with the Meredith stained glass Elkhorn is so justly famous for.

Despite the suddenness with which I was forced to make this journey, and my sadness at not being able to see you, I am immensely proud to finally be an official citizen of Elkhorn. I am part of a tradition, 800 years long, of engineers who decided to leave behind the inanities of life in the rest of the world and focus on their craft. As I said above, I was able to convince a sailor here to send this letter. But doing so was a violation of the laws here, which are, as you have probably heard, very strict. I do not know if or when I will be able to write again.

As I write this, the sun is setting and one by one the newly green stars are coming out. Once again, I'm sorry that I was not able to write sooner and that you probably feared the worst for me. But

know that I am safe and comfortable and that I am able to work on my projects with resources I'd previously only dreamed of.

Please know that I am doing well and that I trust you will make good decisions about your future. You have a good head on your shoulders and a good heart. Trust them both.

Your loving father, Stuart R. Greenwood

Then, our man Howie, unable to decipher the strange writing on the letter, made the only reasonable conclusion he could make.

“Huh. Fourteen cheques from the patent office and a bunch of gobbledygook. I guess this one can go in the stove.”