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The Milkman of St. Gaff's

PART TWO

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St. Gaff's Island



26. The Hand of God

“Oftentimes, we didn’t know who was hunting who,” Travis said. “If we were hunting the Falena or if they were leading us into some loathsome trap. Three rowboats, with a dozen men apiece in each. A Seeker in the bow, harpoon held high. I saw my own grandfather with the helmet. Horns from the wild Aurochs that once roamed this isle.

Our kind were never entirely welcome in the community, even in my grandfather’s day. Except when it came time for the hunt. The sacred harpoon, the weapon of the Seeker, pulled us towards the Falena. I was brought onboard as a bailer for the first time when I was eleven. I don’t mind telling you, I was terrified.

I remember the cry, “Falena!” when my grandfather spotted the green flash. We caught up to the beast. I’ll never forget glimpsing the great green eye as it surfaced. The eye filled me with a sense of calm, even as we were in mortal jeopardy. My grandfather threw his harpoon and it stuck. But the beast just dove under the water, pulling us along. It came back to the surface, thrashing, huge. It tried to shake us off. It attacked.

And there above us, was the hand of God. We were in the shadow of the whale’s great tail fin. Screams of terror were drowned out by the waves crashing over the boats. The last I ever saw of my grandfather, I watched him sink...”

I’d been listening to this story for a long time. I don’t think Travis had any idea how early us milkmen had to get up in the morning. And even though the story was pretty touching and all that, I stood up and told him I really had to get going. We’d been sitting on his dock for what seemed like hours and it was getting cold, too.

It was a Sunday night. I’d had a couple of conversations with Travis about everything that’d happened. I told him I wanted to learn all the secrets of the Seekers and eventually he agreed to fill me in. I thought he was going to tell me about how to summon whales and fight with a harpoon, but instead he just told me this long tale about his grandfather and how things used to be in the olden days.

“Sorry, Travis, it’s just that...”

“I understand, Howie. It’s a lot to take in.”

“But I’ll come back for another chat. Maybe you can show me more about how to use the harpoon.”

“You’ll be better served by an understanding of our history and our place in the world today. For it is a time of patient waiting.”

Travis really knew how to drone on when it was obvious I wasn’t paying any attention. He’d been sipping his whiskey out of a metal cup. Probably that’s why he wouldn’t stop talking. He offered me some, but I’d learned from my dad that it’s better to avoid that stuff completely.

I was still trying to detach myself from his rambling when Naomi came down from the house. She gave me a dirty look and then helped Travis to his feet. I think standing up made all the whiskey go to his head, because he just sort of trailed off in the middle of a sentence.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

Travis was a bit wobbly on his feet.

“And you. Why don’t you leave him alone? He’s got to go to work in the morning.”

“Sorry. He wanted to talk, so I listened.”

She said nothing and helped Travis back up the hill.

I called out after her:

“You know, I have to get up early, too. He’s the one who wouldn’t stop talking.”

But she didn’t say a thing.

This was before the university and the house But I’ll tell all about all of that later.

On the drive back into town, I thought about life. The green geyser shot up into the sky, providing some light for the journey and some inspiration for my future. I was done just hiding my head in the sand and pretending to be an ordinary guy like everyone else. I knew my destiny had higher plans in mind for me. I didn’t know exactly where I was going, but I knew where I’d been before and I’d made up my mind. I was going to learn everything I could from Travis about being a Seeker. I was going to show everyone what I could do and shake the dust of this little town off my boots and strike out on a new direction. Even if the path ahead was lonely and even if I had to walk it alone, like a hobo, I was done being Mr. Ordinary Guy. The universe had put me here among the milkmen for a reason. The man from the Department of Lactic Affairs could tell that I had what it took to be a top man in the organization and I was going to prove it to Corwin too.

As I pulled into town, I drove around a bit. I passed the church and saw the dull glow through the stained glass windows. I drove around some big holes and past where Granard’s place had been. He wanted to rebuild, but the geological men were giving him a hard time because they wanted to do studies of the area or something. I passed by Mr. Greenwood’s house and felt a pang of sadness for the way things had turned out for him. The house was totally dark. I stopped the truck outside and just watched. I remembered all those months ago when Stormy caught me looking up at her window.

“Are you a peeping Tom now, Howie?”

I’d had so many great times here. It would be sad to move on, but time, like a giant boulder rolling down a hill, doesn’t know where it’s going, and it can’t be stopped.

Anyways, I parked the truck. We had to park all the trucks on the street since the parking lot was roped off because of the geyser. I walked home and I was feeling pretty good and relaxed. In the couple of weeks since that night, I hadn’t had any spells at all. Maybe Dr. Barrett was right and it was just an

affliction of youth that would wear off. That was one of his theories anyways. Or maybe I'd just finally defeated the things that wanted me back.

When I got to my building, the kid who was always bouncing a ball was outside bouncing his ball. When he saw me, he grabbed the ball and ran over.

"Hey Mr. Milkman! Come quick! There's a cow in your room. And it's dead and full of bugs and flies!"

"What?"

I ran up to my room as fast as I could. The kid was right behind me. I almost knocked over Mrs. Sommertag.

"Howie, hey!"

I threw the door open. It wasn't locked, but there was no cow. I turned around but the kid had run off, giggling. Looking back, I guess it was a good joke, but at the time, I was pretty annoyed. So I ran after the kid, up the stairs. But he was inside his apartment before I could catch up. I knocked on the door. I heard hushed voices. The kid's mom opened the door. She could hardly keep a straight face.

"I'm terribly sorry, Howie. He's a bit of a prankster, he is. And with everything that's happened...well, you know how it is."

"I suppose you're right, missus, I'm sure he didn't mean any harm."

"Oh, of course not, course not."

As I was leaving I swear I heard mother and son giggling again behind the door.

I tried not to let it bother me. I went back to my room, sat down on my bed, listened to the banging on the wall for a bit, and before I knew it, I was fast asleep

On my rounds, I went out to see Travis first, of course. It was a bit strange going right back after I'd just been there the night before. But oddly, Travis wasn't out yet. Naomi came to meet me. There was a cold wind this grey morning, and she was wrapped up in her father's oilskin coat. She'd always been pretty friendly with me, but lately she'd been a lot less happy to see me. As she came down to the truck, holding this coat around her, with the hood over her head, she had a look in her eyes that was kind of wary and kind of telling me to get lost.

"Just one bottle this morning."

"Travis okay?"

"My dad's fine, Howie."

"Sorry about keeping him up so late last night. We get to talking and the time just blows right on by."

“I wish you’d stop it.”

“What?”

“He doesn’t need you stirring up all these ideas in his head.”

“But he thinks I’m —”

“I know what he thinks. And I also know what’s true.”

Then we both looked up because Travis came out the front door. He was in a heavy sweater, but Naomi had his coat. He was trying to hurry down, but you could tell that he wasn’t feeling very good.

“Hey there, Travis. You need a ride in?”

“Thanks, Howie.”

Naomi huffed and carried the bottle back up to the house without even saying goodbye.

On the ride back, it started spitting rain. Travis insisted on keeping the window open and had his face sort of turned into the breeze. He was holding tight to the door and just looking straight ahead without saying much.

“Not feeling well this morning?”

“No.”

“I guess we overdid it a bit last night.”

He didn’t say anything. Just to pass the time I told him about the kid last night with the ball and the cow. Travis just kind of grunted as if to say, ‘that’s kind of funny.’

“Naomi seemed pretty annoyed with me.”

At this, he looked over at me for a second.

“I went a couple more rounds after you left. We had an argument. Nothing to worry about.”

At the shipyard I let him off and watched him walk across the road. I could see all the beads of rain collecting on his wool sweater.

I did all my rounds, such as they were. It was all a bit jumbled since the town was still such a mess. But Corwin insisted that anyone who still had an address and who wanted milk would get it. But for the moment, my rounds didn’t take as long as they used to. A lot of people were living with family or friends, or they just moved away.

Granard’s shop, like I said before, was burned down. He and his family were living above the barber’s shop. Mel, the barber, lived alone above his own shop and so it was probably nice to have some company.

Of course, I couldn't get one of Granard's sandwiches for Wheelan. So I'd been getting them from Brixton's, which was a bit further away. And even though Granard told me to try them out, neither Wheelan nor I thought they were as good.

Father Wheelan always looked a little sad when I handed him his lunch. But I decided to get some background information for my mission. I asked him if I could come in to the church for a minute to chat.

"Of course, my son!"

"Oh...well, Travis...his family really were Seekers, yes. So they say. St. Gaff's was the last place they still hunted whales here in the old fashioned way, with lots of boats and spears, yes. But that all stopped more than 40 years ago."

"And so the Seekers could really seek out the Falena?"

"Oh, I don't know. So they say. You know, my grandmother swore she could witch for water. And as a matter of fact, I watched her do it one day. She just picked up a regular stick off the ground with a forked branch. She held it in a particular way with her wrists turned up and walked around. I saw with my own eyes that the stick dipped down, and after, she showed me her hands. They were red and scratched from the wood pulling. Now how could she have gotten those marks if the stick hadn't pulled down on its own? And sure enough, they dug down a bit and there was water. So really, who knows?"

"That's an interesting story about your grandmother."

"What I mean to say is. There are lots of things in the world that seem mysterious and inexplicable. But that doesn't mean there isn't an explanation out there. People used to think that if you looked at their kids the wrong way, they'd be haunted by evil spirits. Now we know that's just superstition. Listen, Howie. I wouldn't take anything Travis says too seriously, okay?"

"But he's got this elaborate explanation about the whaler and the things under the earth and in the sea."

"Travis, the Seekers, a lot of fishermen in the old days, they're all part of what theologians call the Manicheistic heresy. If memory serves, they believe the universe is divided into....well, I don't want to get into it. Suffice it to say that the church branded them heretics centuries ago. It's a minor heresy, but a heresy nonetheless. Again, the point is, it's all old wives tales and nothing a young lad like you should worry about. Okay?"

Outside, I was really bewildered by what he'd said. I'd seen what Travis could do with my own eyes. I knew what I'd seen with my own eyes. I'd have to sort it all out later. Walking back to my truck I saw, up the road, Granard speaking with one of the men from the geological survey. Not being in too much of a rush, I went over to chit chat.

The Chippery was gutted by fire and there was just a bit of the first floor left standing. A hole had opened up nearby and the geological people were still studying everything.

I could hear them as I approached.

"So how long until I can rebuild?"

“Depends on what we find. Could be a while, I’m afraid.”

They both stopped talking when I got close and they just looked at me.

“Oh, I was just wondering when the Chippery’s going to open up again. Father Wheelan’s pretty unhappy about getting his lunch from Brixton’s.”

The geological man, dressed in black like the rest of them, gave an annoyed sigh.

“As I was saying, it all depends on what we find. We’ve got to be sure the area’s safe before we can let anyone rebuild here.”

Granard got his back up at this.

“You mean there’s a chance I won’t be able to rebuild at all?”

“I didn’t say that. But if we can’t stabilize the ground here, there’s not much we can do.”

I’d been kind of kicking at the burnt wall while they talked since it was a bit boring, but I felt like I couldn’t leave right away. And I guess I kicked it the wrong way, because part of the wall fell over. Granard stopped talking and just glowered at me.

“Sorry. Well, it was falling over anyways. And I have to get going. See you later, Granard.”

They didn’t say a thing as I left. I mean, the building was burned down already, so I didn’t know what the big deal was. I thought I could hear Granard as I walked away...

“It’s him you should be investigating. This whole mess is his fault.”

Near the end of my rounds, I decided to take the truck a bit out of my way to go visit McMyrtle. I really wanted to check up on him and make sure he was doing okay and to see if he needed anything. He seemed more or less okay after the geyser, except that he was a bit dopier than usual. Corwin wasn’t sure about giving him a delivery route right away, so they tried to get him to clean up and mop in the station. But the first thing he did, he was in the room with the milk bottling machine and he somehow got his hand caught in the milk hole. The milk hole, in case I didn’t mention it before, is a hole in the floor and any milk or other junk that spills in there goes down the milk hole. It can get pretty gunky if it’s not cleaned regularly. And there’s an electric grinding mechanism in there that you can turn on to ground up the chunky bits. Anyways, McMyrtle did the last thing you’re ever supposed to do, which is to put your hand down there. He got stuck and it was hours before anyone found him. I actually thought I heard him moaning for help the day it happened when I was on my way home, but I figured he was just being his usual idiot self so I didn’t pay much attention. It’s not like it was such a big deal. His hand just had some cuts and it would heal up no problem. I, on the other hand, had lost a finger in the line of duty and no one even seemed to care.

But he made a big deal about it, and Corwin decided to let him have some time to more fully recuperate and to let his brain recover before he could come back. So anyways, I decided to go over there. As I parked the truck, I could see the peckerhead lying on a bed all wrapped in blankets on his porch since

it was a bit cold out. The doctor said he needed lots of fresh air. I could see the scar on his stupid head. I hopped out of the truck and headed over. And she got up looking really indignant.

Oh, I forgot to tell you that Stormy had decided to move in with the McMyrtles to help him out. I guess she didn't want to live in her own big house all by herself.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Can't I come to see if my old buddy's okay? A brother milkman?"

"I know why you come around here. And you're not welcome. Just go."

"Okay, but it's part of my job, so I'll just tell Mr. Corwin you wouldn't let me see him and we'll see what he says, if that's what you want."

McMyrtle didn't say anything, but just laid there giving me an infuriating superior smile. He was enjoying every second of his so-called recovery and he wasn't fooling me at all.

I drove back to the station and it started raining harder. I parked right beside Billy on the wall. He was still broken and I guess it wasn't a high priority to fix him. It seemed wrong to just let him stay there broken and all alone by himself there. I decided right then and there that I would raise a stink with Corwin about it and that I would make it my personal mission to raise Billy back to his former glory. Or to make him even more impressive than before. His glory would rise as high as the big green geyser.

So I went in to see Corwin. He'd been spending a lot of time talking to the men from the geological survey and some of the others who'd been coming to the island. I was about to deliver a big speech about the upkeep of the station and how it was falling behind, but I got a bit nervous and then he started speaking before I could get going.

"Any progress with Travis?"

"I was out there last night and I stayed pretty late. I got him talking. And he was drinking so that helped loosen him up. But really he just seems to be wrapped up in old memories and superstitions. I don't think he's got the sorts of abilities I do. And I asked Father Wheelan and he also said Travis was just like an old wife with his tales."

"Did you ask him to come see me as I 'd asked?"

I froze for a second, but then did some quick thinking.

"Howie?"

"Yes, I asked. But he said he didn't want to come speak with you."

"And why not?"

"He said he was too busy."

“I’d still like to speak with him directly. He should still be at work. Why don’t you take a truck and see if you can find him. Bring him here. Tell him it’s just an informal discussion. We’re just trying to piece together what happened in our parking lot.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Corwin.”

When I got outside, the rain had really picked up. It was turning into a real storm. I ran into the truck and started it up. Out on the road, there was so much rain it was hard to see. Then there were bits of who knows what clattering against the windows. Maybe sand or little shells from the sea? I kept driving for a bit, but I couldn’t see the road and wasn’t even sure where I was going. I didn’t know what to do. Until the things hitting the window got bigger and then something flew through the windshield, smashing it and getting glass and freezing salt water all over me. The truck hit something and I got out. The rain seemed to have stopped and I could see the truck had hit a sand dune...but it was snow. I looked around and my eyes adjusted. I was on a lone level plain of snow with nothing but my truck and the sky was white like the snow but just a little bit grey. I must have ended up at one of the poles and it was cold. I shook the glass off and just waited there. I got back in the truck. I waited and waited, but there was nothing. I got a bit panicky since somewhere in my mind I knew this must be some kind of spell, but it wasn’t ending. I’d never had a spell where I was all alone before without any company at all. Maybe it was because my birthday was coming up. I didn’t even hear any snickering. Just my own breath and the wind outside. I couldn’t tell if there was any sun or where it might be coming from. I could hardly see the horizon.

I closed my eyes, thinking it would stop. I even think I fell asleep a bit, but when I opened my eyes, I was still there and really cold. Especially my fingers. I really felt like I’d been there for hours.

So I got out and walked, thinking maybe that would shake things up. I walked and I walked, but when I turned around, I couldn’t see the truck anymore. The directions all seemed the same and nothing in the landscape ever changed. I was getting scared because I was really really cold and my uniform was not helping. My toes in my boots felt like they were on fire, and then I couldn’t feel them. My teeth chattered uncontrollably and I was walking slower and slower.

The last thing I remember was seeing that my fingers were blue and wrinkled. Then I collapsed.

When I came to, I was in the truck and it was pitch black and the truck was on a funny angle. It was still raining pretty hard, but the windshield wasn’t broken. Then I saw what had happened: I’d driven into a bank of earth that one of the holes had thrown up and the truck’s front wheels were sort of in a little muddy depression in the ground. I thought that maybe I should stay away from the holes in the future. I put the truck in reverse, but the wheels were spinning in the mud. I got out and tried to push, but it was hard.

Mel the barber hurried by in the rain and I called out asking if he would help. But the bastard pretended not to hear me. That made me pretty annoyed and with one mighty grunt, I used all my annoyance to push the truck back a bit.

Success!

I hopped in and got the truck going. I was soaked and dirty. But I had a mission to accomplish. I didn't know how long I'd been out, but when I got to the shipyard, it was deserted. I thought maybe I could catch Travis on his way home, so I took the coast road out.

I drove for a long time and began to worry that I'd completely missed him. But then, maybe a half mile from his house, I spotted him. His wool sweater was drooping with water. I pulled up beside him. He looked confused.

"Want a lift?"

"I live right there."

"Just thought I'd ask."

So he jumped in and we drove for a minute.

"So what brings you out here?"

"I just couldn't wait to hear more about the Seekers and how I could learn to summon the whales myself."

"It doesn't really work that way, Howie. I appreciate you coming out here, but it's not a good night for talking."

We were at his place by this time, and he jumped out and ran to his cottage without saying anything. I saw Naomi open the door and give me a bad look. She said something to Travis and he just raised his hands in the air like he was confused. I sat there for a while trying to get warm and thinking about what to do next. The rain was letting up a bit. I watched the cottage with its warm glow inside and I imagined myself getting warmed up by the fire and smelling dinner cooking. Then an upstairs curtain was pulled back and there was Naomi staring at me. I don't know why she was acting so strangely, but I decided to drive back into town.

I was cold and hungry, so I popped into Brixton's and got a big bowl of chowder and also this thing he makes with salt cod and milk and oil.

Back home, and in some dry clothes, I didn't have anything to read, so I pulled my chair up to the window and ate my hearty meal. I wished it was easier to get dinner sometimes and Brixton's was still pretty good, but I did miss Granard's. Out the window, not many people were out and about. Since the geyser, there were lots of new people in St. Gaff's. Most stayed at the big hotel. And in the evenings, they liked to walk up and down the harbour. Just walking up and down for no reason except that they liked to walk there. There were the geology men all in black, but also tourists who just came to look, and different kinds of researchers. I'd seen photographers setting up their cameras to take pictures of the geyser from the harbour. It was entertaining to watch the people strolling, but tonight there was no one. Even though the rain was pretty much done.

And then I had a flash of inspiration. One of the most brilliant ideas I'd ever had. I was going a bit stir crazy just sitting there eating and looking at nothing out the window, and this idea kept growing in my mind. So I decided to just go out right now. Before I knew it, I was downtown and knocking on Mel's

door. He came down the stairs and did not look happy to see me. But it wasn't him I wanted to talk to. He let me up to his place, and then Granard came to the door. Also not happy to see me.

"What do you want?"

"Sorry to bother you. But I had an idea and I wanted to tell you right away."

"And?"

"Everyone loves your fish sandwiches, right? And who knows when you can rebuild your shop. I also noticed, since I live by the harbour, that all these new people are always hanging around down there. Where I grew up in...Buckle...there were always guys with shacks at the harbour selling food right there. Maybe you could do the same. Set up a fish sandwich stand right on the water. Just a simple stand with a little roof. All those people from Mingsbight will love it. And then I can get my dinner much easier too!"

His face softened up as I was talking. When I was done he just stood there for a second. Then,

"That's actually not a bad idea, Howie."

"Well what are friends for, right?"

Then his face darkened again.

"I got to get back my family. But thanks for the idea."

I left feeling like a million Ruperts. I could tell that my new frame of mind was working. I wasn't just thinking like everyone else anymore and I was striking out in new directions no one had ever seen before. I had a good sleep imagining what it would be like to just hop down the stairs and get a sandwich. I bet Granard would even give me free ones since I was the key to his new success.

But in the morning before my rounds, Corwin was really annoyed with me. I'd completely forgotten to ask Travis to come talk to him. I just explained with the truth that I'd hit something in the rain and Travis was most of the way home by the time I found him anyways.

"But you told him I wanted to see him?"

"Of course! He said he didn't really want to because he only wants to talk to those from his religious group. The Manicheaists."

"He told you he wouldn't come and see me?"

"He said he probably wouldn't. He's a proud man."

And then I screwed up my courage.

"But Mr. Corwin. He really just seems to be an old rambler. He was there that night, but he didn't do anything except hand me a harpoon. To tell you the truth, it was me who attacked the thing that was coming out of the hole. I'm the one with the abilities. Whatever you wanted Travis to do, I can do it!"

“We’ve gone down that road, Howie. It didn’t pan out the way I’d hoped. You’re a good milkman. You’ve got a solid future ahead of you here on St. Gaff’s. We need you to keep gathering information the way you’ve been doing. But as for the rest, going underground, we’re not going to need you to do that any more. We’ve changed the project here. Okay...if you couldn’t get Travis to come down, I’ll send Frank and Beaver to his place. We’ll get him in here one way or another. That’ll be all. Thanks, Howie.”

Outside his office, looking up at the grey sky, I felt like I just drank a pint of pickle juice. Like all four tires of my milk truck had just gone flat and I’d been left in the middle of nowhere. I didn’t want to just be a milkman, delivering milk and messages. And I didn’t see why Travis was being so difficult. He could just show me what to do and he’d be off the hook. Now he was going to have Beaver and Frank after him. Serves him right, I guess. He wasn’t helping me and he wouldn’t even go talk to Mr. Corwin. He was really asking for it.

I’d really worked myself up by the time I got to his place that morning. I handed him the bottle and asked if he wanted a ride in. Naomi, as usual these days, was watching suspiciously.

“It’s a nice morning. The walk’ll do me good.”

“Listen. I don’t want to be rude or anything. But I have to tell you that you should really show me how to be a Seeker. I’ll tell you something that’s top secret. The milkmen need a Seeker like me for some important work for the Department. They know about what happened that night with the geyser. I’m trying to be on your side and protect you. But if you don’t help out, it sounds like they’re going to send Frank and Beaver over.”

Travis looked genuinely shocked at this. I guess he thought I was just looking for some spiritual enlightenment or something.

“If I were you, I’d go talk to Mr. Corwin and straighten things out.”

Then Naomi chimed in.

“Don’t do it, dad. Why don’t you just leave us alone?”

“No, it’s okay, Naomi. Maybe you could give me a ride in, Howie. I’ll talk to him. We’ll put an end to this right now.”

We drove in and didn’t say much. I felt like my relationship with Travis and Naomi had really gone sour and it was too bad. I loved the big breakfasts and dinners I sometimes had out there. But, like Corwin says, this is war. And maybe we’d smooth things over after Corwin explained everything to him. So I dropped him off. Then I decided to go in with him just to make sure everything was clear.

“Mr. Corwin? In the end I convinced him to come in. No need to get Frank and Beaver involved.”

Travis gave me a confused look. But then Mr. Corwin took over.

“Thank you for coming, Travis. Have a seat. I just wanted to have a quick chat with you. Okay, Howie. On your way.”

And after that, I didn't hear anything about how the meeting went. Corwin wouldn't tell me anything. Travis was really perfunctory with me for the next few days. I went about my business. I delivered the radio message. I ate my dinner and watched out the window as Granard's shack took shape. But I didn't know what my next move would be. I wasn't prepared to just do this forever.

Then, one day after work, I had a breakthrough. I decided to go down to the drug store since I was really getting tired of the same old routine. Being there reminded me of the good old days with Stormy. Molly was there with Leo and the others. I worked up the nerve to go over to their group. Molly saw me coming and gave me a faint wave and a sickly smile. I had enough sense to know that she didn't want me there, so I pretended I was just going to the counter where people drop off prescriptions. And there was Naomi just getting something from the druggist. I'd tried again that morning to get Travis to talk to me, but he'd just clammed up as usual.

"Hey Naomi. How's your dad?"

"How's my dad? Listen, Howie, I was meaning to talk to you. Walk with me a minute?"

"Sure!"

I walked by Molly and the others and tried to make sure they saw that I was going somewhere with a girl.

Outside, Naomi and I sat on a bench.

"Listen, Howie, my dad doesn't want me to talk to you, but I can see that you're really serious about learning the secrets of the Seeker. So I'm going to tell you what to do, but you have to promise that you'll keep this a secret and that you'll only use this power for good. Okay"

"Really?"

"Really. I know you want to get that big promotion, and this will really help. And just between you and me, I'd rather you be the one who helps the milkman and not my dad. He's getting old, and it'd be better if you guys would just leave us alone."

"Of course, I think that's really smart."

So she started walking me through what I had to do, and it didn't sound nearly as complicated as I thought it would be.

"No, it doesn't have to be a harpoon. Any stick should do. The main thing is to be in the right frame of mind, to summon up your inner spirits and to say the right words: 'Righty oh, Falena, oh, come to the aid of this Seeker, oh.'"

"And do I have to wait until I see them in a green flash in the sea?"

"No, this is one of the deepest secrets of the Seekers. The Falena are all around us in the sea. If you give the secret distress call, they will come to you."

I went home as fast as I could after that and wrote down the words so I wouldn't forget. I could see what Travis meant about how hard it is to sit and wait patiently for the right time. I wanted to run out right away and show everybody what I could do, but bide my time I did. And as hard as it was to wait, it was a good feeling to know that pretty soon I was going to show everyone what I could really do. After giving it some thought, I decided that Sunday after church would be the best time. Everyone would just have heard the sermon from Father Wheelan, and that was the time when most people were out of the harbour, walking around the rest of the week, delivering milk. I was in a great mood. I swung by McMyrtle's place to ask how he was doing, and I didn't even get annoyed at the cold reception. Just smiled and knowing look, since soon they would know the truth about me.

I was delighted to see that Sunday morning was beautiful. There were no clouds in the sky, and there was a sweet, warm breeze blowing through the town. I thought about going to church, but I was actually too nervous, so I just stayed home. But it was hard to sit there doing nothing, so I went out walking along the waterfront. I sat on a bench for a while and just let the breeze wash over me and listened to the birds singing. I watched as Granard came with his supplies. His shack was finally up and running, and I thought I'd treat myself to some lunch. More and more people were coming down. At first, it was mostly the Mingsbight, people who generally didn't go to church as much.

"Howie?"

"One fish sandwich, please."

He fried it up right there and then. And the smell was amazing. It was still nice and hot when he handed it to me. I was annoyed that he made me pay for the sandwich, since he'd just be at home twiddling his thumbs, if it wasn't for my idea. I was about to say something, but some guy in a tweed jacket with goofy elbow patches was already asking Granard for something.

"How much for one of the sandwiches?"

I decided to use my self control and not let anything bother me today. So I sat back down on the bench and watched the harbor fill up with people. The kid with the ball walked by, but again, I didn't let the little jerk bother me. My neighbour was there, mumbling away and enjoying the sun, and Mrs. Sommertag, and even Dr Barrett was there.

I decided it was time, so I got up and walked. But I have to say that as I promenaded up and down, I couldn't help but notice that the townsfolk were giving me funny looks. In fact, I got the distinct impression that I had become odious to these people. Not that I cared so much anymore. I wasn't like them. Today was the day when I was going to raise myself above all the ordinariness around me. I walked to a spot where a bunch of people were and several of the geological men, and I was about to start my incantation, but then I decided it wasn't the right time after all. I did this a couple of times since, truth be told, I was nervous, but who wouldn't be?

And then I remembered I was supposed to have a stick. I felt my face go red. How could I have forgotten? I'd worked myself up like this for nothing? I turned to head for home and saw my neighbour with her stick. This, I thought to myself, was my last chance.

“Hey, can I borrow your stick for a minute?”

“My stick?”

And she held it closer to herself. So annoying.

“Please, just for a minute. I’ll give it right back.”

“No.”

I remembered that Father Whelan once gave a sermon about Saint Niccolo, who taught that as long as you succeed, no one will care how you did it. So this was sort of like that. I knew it wasn't very nice, but I just grabbed the stick out of her hands. That was the action of no return. I knew I didn't have much time, since my neighbour stormed off to find her sister, Mrs. Sommertag, I supposed. And I didn't have much time before there would be a scene, so I marched to the edge of the water and began.

“Righty oh, Falana oh.”

But I was speaking much too quietly for anyone to notice. The only one watching was the guy with the tweed jacket. So I closed my eyes, took a breath.

“Righty oh, Falana oh, come to the aid of this Seeker, oh.”

A few people had heard me, and a couple were snickering behind my back. My eyes were still clenched closed. I didn't know what to think. But then there was a huge sound of crashing waves. I opened my eyes. It wasn't glowing green, but just like time was slowing down, I watched the biggest whale I'd ever seen rise out of the sea and high into the air above us. Its huge body and tail blocked out the sun. I looked up, we were all in the shadow of the hand of God.

27. The Cows

The great fish rose from the sea and eclipsed us in its shadow. It came up head first, and then did the most magnificent flip in the air, its tail blocking out the sun. Time slowed right down as I watched, with my mouth all agape. The first thought that shot through my mind was that I couldn't believe that I'd actually summoned something, since, to admit the truth, in the back of my head, I thought maybe Naomi hadn't been telling me the truth. My next thought was that the whale was really big and that it was going to crash down right where I was standing. So I turned and ran.

And sure enough, with a big horrible crash, the beast smashed down onto the wharf. I turned to see the hideous site. The whale, which was definitely not a glowing green Falena whale, was in its death throes, writhing horribly. Its skin was all cracked like an orange someone stepped on and stuff was oozing out. Everyone on the wharf was watching, stunned. Granard was standing pretty close to me. He looked stunned too. But then he looked angry. The whale had landed right on his fish stand.

Everything after that was a bit confusing. The man in the tweed jacket, who I learned later was Professor Lamy from Mingsbight University, was asking me about how I'd done that. But I was pretty dazed trying to figure out what had happened, so I didn't really hear him. I'd dropped the stick on the ground and while the professor was still talking at me, my neighbour picked it up and walked off. Then the guys in black were pointing at me and walking over. Most everyone else was just looking at the dead whale.

"What did you do?" A geology man was asking me.

"Hey! How did you do that?"

"We should take him in."

I was still pretty confused and didn't really know what to say. Then I came to my senses a bit and remembered: this was my destiny and this is what I'd wanted to happen.

"I called the whale. I'm a Seeker."

The men looked at each other.

"You gut founded scoffing sack of —"

Granard overheard what I said and lunged at me with both his hands like he was going to strangle me. But the geologists pushed him back.

"Let's get him out of here. Come on."

One grabbed me under my arm and started walking me away from everyone else. The professor was following.

"Excuse me, I'd like a word with —"

"Back please."

"I just wanted —"

"Back!"

The professor backed off and the men from the geological survey walked me pretty fast up into town.

"Am I in trouble?"

He said nothing. A few people were following at a distance, but they didn't dare get too close.

They brought me to the hotel and I thought we were going to go to a room, but instead we went down some stairs to the boiler room. It was dark and dingy with huge rusty machines humming away. There were desks set up down there with a few people working, writing things down and boxes of papers all around. Everyone looked up when we came in. They pointed to a chair and I sat down and tried to collect up my thoughts.

All the men, about eight when I counted them, huddled together in another part of the room. Then the guy I supposed was the boss because he had thick black rimmed glasses on, came over and pulled up a chair in front of me. He was staring hard at me. Not in an unfriendly way, but just the way you'd stare at a frog you were about to dissect in high school (not that I ever got quite that far).

"What's your name, son?"

"Howie Coxwell, sir."

"Oh, you don't have to call me sir. We're just having a friendly little chat. My name's Mr. Jenky with the National Geological Survey. You've probably seen us around investigating that big old geyser."

"The geyser. That was me, too."

He looked a bit confused and went on.

"So my colleagues over there. They tell me you were out at the harbour today and something mighty strange happened. Care to tell me about it?"

I realized with horror that it was now I who was being interrogated and I had to think as quickly as I could about what to say. I didn't think I'd done anything wrong, exactly. And when I reflected a bit, I meant to show everyone what I could do, even though I didn't know I could actually do it. But on the other hand –

"How about it, son? Cat got your tongue?"

He interrupted me right in the middle of my thinking. One of the other men came over and stood behind Mr. Jenky.

"Like I said. My name's Howie and I'm a milkman here in St. Gaff's."

When I said that, Mr. Jenky looked over his shoulder at the other guy and I thought I detected a bit of worry flashing across both their faces. But then the smile returned.

"Okay, so you're a milkman. What we're wanting to know about, though, is that whale."

I'd calmed down a bit and decided that now was my chance to shine the way I always knew I should.

"Like I told the other guy. I'm a Seeker and I called the whale myself."

"You're a Seeker and you called the whale."

"That's right."

“And could you tell me exactly how you called the whale?”

I sat up in my chair.

“There are certain incantations that us Seekers know and we can call up the whales whenever we want.”

“Certain...incantations?”

“That’s right. To tell you the truth, I was hoping for a Falena. One of the green whales with the glowing bones you see in church, but I was probably just a little off with one or two of the words.”

Mr. Jenky gave me a weird look and stood up. I guess maybe he was a bit nervous to find out who he was dealing with. Just then there was a loud banging on the door and in burst Beaver and Frank. Beaver saw me and shouted.

“Hey! Back off. He’s a milkman.”

Mr. Jenky turned to them.

“Whoa fellas. We’re just having a friendly chat here.”

The other geologists came over trying to look intimidating. But Beaver stared them down.

“Back off, you lot.”

Then Frank walked over and helped me up.

“The chat’s over. Howie here’s an asset of ours and he’s not permitted to talk to anyone about his activities.”

Jenky couldn’t help but blurt out,

“You mean he’s really — “

“Any more questions you’ve got, you can ask Mr. Corwin, down at the station.”

And with that, we left the hotel.

Frank and Beaver didn’t say much, but they brought me to Corwin.

“So you were at the harbour and a whale jumped out?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you had something to do with it?”

“I think so.”

“Just a coincidence, I’m sure.”

So that was going to be our cover story. Smart. Very smart.

“Yes, sir. Coincidence it is, sir.”

“And don’t speak to anyone from the geological survey. The Department doesn’t see eye to eye with them on what goes on underground. We don’t want you blurting out something you’re not supposed to.”

“Of course not, sir.”

“And what should I do from now on?”

“What do you mean?”

“My duties?”

“You’ll do your rounds, of course. Why are you asking?”

So he wanted to play it that way. It made sense. I couldn’t wait to hear what Travis and Naomi thought about what I’d done. I drove out to their place extra fast Monday morning.

“Morning Travis. Hi Naomi.”

“Morning, Howie,” Travis said.

“So did you hear?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I summoned a whale yesterday at the harbour. You really didn’t hear?”

“Sure, Howie.”

“No, I really did. Don’t get mad, but Naomi told me how to do it. With the stick?”

Travis gave Naomi an angry and perplexed look.

“He’s pulling your leg, dad. I was joking around and told him he could say some silly words and a whale would appear. I didn’t think he’d actually try it.”

I guess Naomi was really worried her dad was going to be mad for telling me the secret.

“Well, it worked.”

They still seemed to be confused. Like they didn’t believe me. But they’d find out soon enough. Driving back, I kept wondering how my life was going to change. One day soon, I knew, I might not be driving out along the coast road every morning and watching the sun rise. It hit me that these were my golden years. The days I’d always look back on fondly. The days when I was like a ship being launched out to sea. Before too long, this was a story I’d be telling my grandkids in a big house somewhere. About meeting Travis and Naomi and learning about my true destiny. I did my rounds that day as usual, thinking

all the while about how delivering milk on the island would soon be a thing of the past. And I didn't have to wait too long, since soon after, things started getting...weird.

There were still a bunch of people who'd been in town to look at the geyser, but before too long they started to come to see me. At first, it was just a trickle of people who'd heard about what had happened. A couple of days after the whale incident, I parked my truck as usual after my rounds and as soon as I left the station, there were two men waiting for me. One with a pencil behind his ear and a notepad who wanted to talk to me. The other guy was carrying around a big contraption that I learned later was a camera.

"Hey, are you by any chance Howie the milkman?"

"Yes."

"I'm Peter. Peter from the Tow Law Runner, how're you doing today?"

"The Tow Law Runner? I love Eliza Pike."

"Yeah...we don't run those any more. Listen, I wanted to ask you —"

"Did you ever meet her?"

"Meet her?"

"Eliza Pike?"

"Uh...you mean the writer? I think she just sent the stories in."

"Oh. That's too bad."

"Yeah, anyways, listen. I wanted to talk to you about the whale."

I tried to answer his questions as best I could and they followed me all the way home. But then pencil ears asked me if I could do it again.

"I don't have my stick."

"Can you get it? We'd love to see you in action."

"Also I only do it when I have a real need. Not just whenever anyone wants, like it's some trick."

"Sorry. Of course."

Then the other guy spoke for the first time.

"Hey, Howie, how about we go down to the harbour where the whale is for a picture?"

I thought about this.

"You mean for the Tow Law Runner? I'll have my picture in there?"

“For sure.”

So down we went.

He set up the camera and wanted to get a picture of me beside the whale. The whale had been mostly cleaned up by this point, but the skeleton with some bits of flesh still hanging off was still there, and I think they were leaving it there as kind of a tourist attraction. It really stank and I didn't want to stand next to the carcass, but for the sake of immortality, I smiled and stood there and waited for him to be done taking the picture.

They tried to convince me again to call another whale or do some other trick, but I refused. At first, it was nice to have the newspaper men asking me all these questions. But after the next issue of the *Tow Law Runner* came out, things started getting out of control. All sorts of reporters and assorted weirdos started following me around. And they were really determined. The geological guys kept their distance for the moment, until, well...I'll have to tell you about that later.

Of course, I got the issue and there, to my utter astonishment, was me on the cover standing beside the whale bones. I'd seen myself in a mirror when I was washing up, but never a photograph of myself. The headline of the article was, *Return of the Seekers?* And below that, *Did Howie the Milkman summon a whale on the island of St. Gaff's?*

I was dismayed at some of the things they said in the article, though. It was short since they wanted to publish it before anyone else. It just said that there were many believable eye-witnesses to the event and that even though it seemed impossible that I was really a Seeker since I just seemed like an ordinary guy, there was as yet no rational explanation for what had happened. But like I said, that was enough to get a lot more reporters and other kinds of people to start coming to the island to try to talk to me. Mr. Corwin insisted that I keep doing my rounds since I was a milkman, afterall. But pretty soon, this all got pretty exhausting.

One night, not long after, something really strange happened. I had some cold sausage and beans for dinner and I was happy to be alone for a bit in my room. I was going to settle down to read the new serial in the *Tow Law Runner*: *Ginger Cedric, Murder Mysteries*, but it was just about regular murders and not nearly as fun as *Eliza Pike*.

So I went to look out the window, and started thinking about things like I usually do. Just watching the stars reflecting on the sea and the waves in the harbour, when someone took a shot at my window. There was a distant bang and my window pretty much exploded into big shards. Before I knew what was happening, I was on the floor with the glass all over me.

I wasn't hurt, but it was pretty scary. Then I got up with my heart pounding. I looked out and didn't see anyone. Mrs. Sommertag was very annoyed at having to fix the window, but it's not like I shot it myself. We decided to just leave the bullet hole in the ceiling where it was. After that, I was always a bit nervous to stand by the window at night. It's a shame, because I like thinking about things.

One time I came home and some woman reporter was in my room. She'd snuck in and was trying to be really charming. But honestly, it freaked me out. I told her to leave after a while. A few of them figured

out my route and started asking everyone about me. I remember the first time that happened, one reporter was talking to Mrs. Noseworthy as I walked up.

“Oh, here he is. Howie came from the mainland, but we just adopted him as one of our own. That’s just the kind of welcoming spirit we islanders have. So good to see you, Howie.”

It was all getting a little strange.

I went to see Corwin and told him how annoying it was to have all these people waiting to pounce on me wherever I went and that it was bound to affect my deliveries.

Corwin said something to me about the whole thing blowing over. But I guess people were just bored to death reading stories about the war and wanted a more fun story and something about good old Howie the milkman who could summon up whales caught their interest. They probably found me even more interesting since, when that woman was in my room, I sort of let it slip that I’d been in a battle to the death with a monster from underground and that I was the one who made the geyser appear. People, it turned out, were ready to believe just about anything.

So anyways, Corwin turned out to be not quite right and people kept following me and it actually started interfering with my milk deliveries. I’ll admit that sometimes I stopped to talk to them. They definitely just wanted to write up one fantastical story about me after another. It was exhausting. Some just wanted to take pictures with me smiling and holding up a milk bottle, which slowed me down. One man kept pestering and pestering me, saying that his wife was very ill and only the oil of the Falena could save her and he got really mad when I refused to help him out. He waited for me outside my building two mornings in a row. I had to ask Beaver to get him to stop bothering me.

Professor Lamy, though, was different. He caught up with me a day or two after the incident and was very polite.

“I wonder, Mr. Coxwell, if you wouldn’t mind having a little chat with me about it. I don’t want to bother you on your way home. How about if we meet up for dinner. I saw a steakhouse close to the hotel. Perhaps we could meet for dinner? My treat, of course.”

Now this was something I couldn’t pass up, so the next day, I went and met him at Stu’s.

I’d never been to a steakhouse before. It was all dark and full of velvet and oak. The professor had red wine and I had a cream soda. They offered a kind of sweet tomato sauce called catsup that I poured on my steak and potatoes. It was absolutely heavenly to be eating like a rich person. The best meal of my life. And the professor wasn’t like the reporters. He wasn’t so blunt. He wanted to get a picture of the complete Howie Coxwell, from head to toe and start to finish.

“So, Howie. Tell me. Where did you grow up?”

He also talked about himself some, so I wouldn’t feel like he was just pumping me for information.

“You know, I’d always wanted to visit this island. My dissertation adviser lived here. Richard Florsham. Did you ever run into him?”

“Oh, I think so. A retired professor. I think I saw him walking around late at night sometimes. I remember hearing that he just disappeared without a trace one day. So sad.”

“Yes, very sad. Sometimes older people can have a stroke and just wander off, confused.”

“Sure. That’s probably what happened to him.”

Luckily, this was just about at the end of dinner and the waiter came by wanting us to pay up. I had dinner a couple more times at Stu’s Steakhouse with the professor. It was great to finally be living the kind of adventurous life I’d always wanted to live. It just goes to show that if you want something badly enough, you’ll eventually get it.

Which reminds me. In the midst of all the attention, I decided to go check up on my old pal, McMyrtle. I sort of let myself be a bit more talkative that day so that the reporters and assorted hangers on – some were just lookyloos who thought I was interesting – would follow me. I walked out there from the milk station, actually.

Of course, McMyrtle must have heard what had happened and he looked like he’d just sucked on a pile of lemons when he saw me. I asked how he was and he said he was feeling much better and thought he’d be ready to assume some responsibilities at the station again. He started saying something about getting a special red badge of his own pretty soon, but he didn’t even sound so convinced himself. Stormy didn’t say anything. I think she was trying to look annoyed. But I could tell that she was sort of intrigued at the new and improved and now famous Howie Coxwell.

I must admit, I’d been pretty disappointed when Corwin told me that I had to keep doing my rounds despite my newfound celebrity status. I figured that as soon as I showed everyone my powers, I’d start getting paid a lot more and I’d be sent on important missions, maybe spying on the enemy, or overseeing operations from the top floor of the department in Mingsbight. But I supposed Corwin was right. We had to play it down and keep a low profile. We milkmen liked to work in the shadows, so to speak. And I was sure that once all these oddballs stopped following me around, my career would start moving in the right direction again.

But things actually got worse career-wise.

After a couple of weeks of this, Corwin called me in and told me that we had to find a way to keep me out of the spotlight because it was no good having me attract all sorts of attention. So, early the next morning, under the cover of darkness and the mysterious green stars, I got myself a milk truck and started out of town. I went up around the Gosse farm where the wolves were and found the road to Aftagley. It was just a rutted track that wasn’t used much. I guess a few trucks went back and forth now and again. It was strange that I’d never noticed any of the trucks coming to the milk station from Aftagley, but Frank said they usually came in the middle of the day so no one would get suspicious.

The drive out was nice. Being short handed, they’d decided to take another chance on McMyrtle and let him do my route, so I had the whole day to myself to do what sounded like a pretty easy mission. I had to close down the experimental farm project.

So over the hills and through the mountains I drove, and then down down down until I got to the little village. I didn't see anyone around, so I went into the inn. The waitress was there and one of the old guys from before.

"Hey! Remember me?"

"No...can't say as I do," the old guy said.

"I don't think so."

I thought they were putting me on. How could neither of them remember me? Maybe I even looked different because of my new station in life. That made sense. I was a take charge kind of guy now, so I decided to take charge.

"You! I'm a milkman and I have direct orders to shut down the farms here. I need you to show me where all the cows are."

He just looked at me with a vacant look.

"Hey! Let's go. I don't have all day long."

"All right, all right. Don't get your nose hairs in a twirl."

He got up very slowly. Took out a pipe and took his time lighting it. Then he pulled up his pants that were falling down. He was trying to show me he didn't need to hurry on my account.

"Okay, follow me."

So I followed him. We went up the main road, then down a partly hidden trail. Eventually we came to a farm house. There was another old guy in a little shack there. Two two geezers chatted about the weather for a while like a pair of idiots until I reminded them that I was on a mission. We went out to a field. It was all overgrown with grass and mossy rocks. But there was the cow. It was weird and thin and it had menacing red eyes that glowed even in the day.

We got a rope and I threw it around the cow's neck. It snapped at me and I jumped back, catching a glimpse of its sharp teeth. The two old guys chuckled at me, but I persevered and tied the rope around its neck. I tried to pull it but the stupid animal wouldn't move.

Eventually, with the old guy's help I got the thing going. I walked it down into the town and tied it to a post by the inn. Then we had to go find another farm. This all took a long time actually and was way more tiring than you'd think. In the end, we got all 6 of the cows from various farms. There was some watery phlogesterion mixed with milk in the canisters I mentioned about last time I was here. We rolled these up to the milk truck and put them in. I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do with them. I suggested just pouring the stuff out, but the old guy really objected. By the time we'd gotten all the cows down to the inn, it was about dinner time and I was starving. I'd forgotten to pack lunch.

I asked about dinner at the inn, but the waitress said they'd run out of food a few days earlier. This seemed strange, but I figured there was nothing for it but to get the mission over with and get back to town.

Corwin told me there was a big raft and a bunch of cinder blocks hidden just up the coast from the main dock. So I got the old guy, who seemed to be constantly smoking cherry flavoured tobacco in his pipe, to help me find it. We pushed it out into the water and I pulled it along to the main dock.

A group of people, all the villagers, mostly old men, but also the waitress and a couple of younger guys who you wouldn't want to try to talk to, had all gathered in front of the inn to watch what I was doing. I found this very annoying. Especially considering that I was supposed to be in charge here and that these were the people who'd tried to kill me and Granard not too long ago. I guess this was the only entertainment they'd had since then.

So with a lot of effort and struggle and a lot of chuckling from the bastards on shore, I eventually managed to get all the cows onto the raft and cinder blocks tied around their legs. I got in the row boat, tied it to the raft (and yes, I was getting good with knots by this time), and started rowing, very slowly out into the sea. I was exhausted and sweaty and starving and couldn't wait to get out of this ridiculous place.

All of this had taken me so long the sun was going down and I was rowing right towards it. The sun was at my back as I rowed, and in front of me, I watched the geyser in the distance get clearer and clearer as the darkness fell. The cows started lowing. The people on shore just stood and stared. When I was out to where I figured the water was deep enough, and far enough from shore, I clambered onto the raft.

It was big and didn't seem too tippy, but not being a man of the sea myself, I found the whole operation a bit scary. The first cow I chose was close to the edge of the raft. It mooed as I pushed the cinder block around its leg overboard. It scrambled to stay on the raft, but then got pulled down over the side and into the water.

I guess I shouldn't have been too surprised when it let out a horrible yell, but I was. And the other cows got spooked and started screaming as well. They didn't know what to do and started bolting and trying to jump. The raft tipped back and forth, and one by one the screaming cows fell into the sea. A rope got tied around my leg and I got pulled in too.

The sea was frothing red. I was in the water with the sinking, panicking cows. I felt them kicking. One's face, with terrified wide red eyes bulging, was right up against my face. I tried to scream and swallowed the salt water... I desperately tried to untangle my leg as I felt myself being pulled down.

28. The End

I know what you're probably thinking. Old Howie's gotten himself into a pickle again. But he'll get out of it. Maybe he'll have one of his spells and see some strange things and maybe he'll even get hurt. But, one way or another, he'll be fine. But this time, I wasn't.

Like I said, I got tangled up in the ropes with the drowning cows. The water was turning red and it was just a mass of kicking legs and awful cow faces. Now, as you know, I've had my episodes where I'm underwater and they've been pretty scary. But in those I could somehow breathe even though there were horrible boggeritches chasing me, or maybe my dead dad was floating around with no teeth. But this was in some ways worse. The rope I was tangled in, after a lot of kicking and thrashing, was no longer attached to a cow. But it was still attached to a cinder block. And the cinder block was, of course, sinking towards the bottom. It was pulling me down deeper and deeper. At first I tried to get the rope off my leg, but I just couldn't. I fought, but my arms and legs very quickly went numb in the frigid water and they felt like wet cement and they wouldn't move. My lungs were burning from holding my breath and I could feel the weight of the sea bearing down on my puny body.

And then, it was almost like a trick of the brain. In a split second, I convinced myself that this wasn't real and that I'd be fine if I just took a breath. And that split second trick was all it took for me to give up...and breathe in...and then, the feeling, more intense than anything I'd ever felt...the panic of feeling the dirty salt water course through my lungs, my chest, scorching.

The world and the universe seemed to contract into a point. And in that point, my eyes no longer saw what was in front of me. I saw me as a baby on some grimy brown carpet, then eating some green stuff off a spoon. Looking in awe at a tree as a young boy. A thousand other images were all there at the same time. My awful teacher. The girl with the hair like a bowl smiling at me with her arms crossed behind her back. All the way up to watching lightning course across the sky over the sea from the coast road on St. Gaff's.

And then somehow, the visions all stopped. I felt like my eyes were wider and whiter than they'd ever been. And I was aware of my body. My eyes frozen open and white with terror and not moving at all. My mouth was open but I couldn't move it at all. And I knew that right then, I was dying. I saw out of my dying eyes the dark shapes of the cows swimming off. The bottom of the raft and the rowboat, so far up above me through the murky water. The weeds stretching up above me. I observed it all without understanding. I just watched with growing quiet as it all went darker and darker.

And then, just like everyone says, there was the hazy green light. Sort of like if you were in a bathroom drain looking up through the hole full of old bathwater. I swam up there and pulled myself through. I've heard, like probably you have, that you're supposed to feel calm and peaceful at this point, like you just don't care any more about all the things back home and the people who might still need you around. But it wasn't really like that. I felt a sort of queasy dread. Like I was in the most trouble I'd ever been in my life. It was calm, in a way. But it was like the calm of resignation when you just have to accept that you've lost and you've run out of chances.

What I saw on the other side of the drain hole was more of a feeling that anything you could see with your eyes. It was the feeling of a thousand men pulling on ropes in pitch blackness in the coldest ocean that's ever been. Slowly, slowly they pulled the thing over. The ice cracking beneath them, not knowing when it might give way. Some struggles you can't understand and won't overcome. A thousand spindles spinning needlessly in the dark. A thousand women hunched over their looms fighting to weave cloth to shield themselves against the cold that's already piercing their joints and aching in their legs.

But there was a feeling of moving. And slowly the fires of a thousand hearths greeted a dull, aching ochre dawn. The uncanny morning light took my hand and pulled me inside. And from the warm hand that held mine, some kind of sense returned to me, like a spring thaw, running up my arms and across my chest, and all through the rest of me. Until I saw that I was standing and looking into the shining countenance of St. Gaff himself, the sentinel of the next world. He smiled balefully at me.

“Someone must have slandered you, my son. The cook should have brought your breakfast by now. It’s after 8 o’clock. And as you see, there is no one here. And no breakfast. You might try to ring the bell, but I’m afraid that at this hour, the lady has gone home.”

I began to see what was around me. I was sitting now on a straw mattress. The saint sat beside me. It was a small room with smooth beige walls. I stood up and the ceiling was too low for me to stand up all the way.

“Why don’t I get to have any breakfast?”

“You people really are such a pain. As I said, you’ve missed breakfast. Lunch should be at 11:30. I shall be your guide here, but only until 8:45. Your trial will begin at 9 o’clock sharp.”

“My trial?”

A flash of worry crossed his face.

“You are Howie Coxwell, are you not?”

“Of course!”

He looked relieved.

“Don’t tell me you thought you’d get away scot free.”

I looked out the window, hunching over. The ground was orange and there were municipal type buildings with arches and fountains. A locomotive trundled along in the distance with cotton ball smoke trailing behind. Two men spoke conspiratorially just outside. A milky white river ran through the town centre. And there was a statue of a bricklayer raising his trowel up to the heavens.

“Is this the isle of the blessed?”

The saint chuckled to himself.

“You are in the land of Eugalapos. This is the district of Verleumdet.”

“And I have to go to a trial?”

“Yes. You see that building there? With the arches? You’re supposed to be there at nine sharp.”

“Or what?”

“Well, as our blessed saviour said, let’s cross that kettle of fish when we come to it.”

“Is that river really full of milk? Am I imagining things?”

St. Gaff became quite solemn.

“The milkmen. They do have their secrets.”

Shortly after that, St. Gaff left. I rang the bell on the wall, but the saint was right. The cook must have gone home because no one answered. It was annoying because I was getting hungry.

I left my room, walked down the corridor and out into the square. There was no sun, even though it was light out and there were no clouds. I walked around a bit, but all the men in their sharp suits just stared at me when I tried to ask what time it was. There weren't any shops. Not that I had any money. And the only door I could see was the door to the court.

I thought that it would be great to tell Stormy about this place and this crazy adventure. But then I remembered that I was dead. And that Stormy was shackled up with that miserable peckerhead, McMyrtle. I made myself a promise that if I could go back as a ghost or something, I'd haunt the hell out of that guy. And then I thought I could maybe haunt Stormy a bit too. But not in a creepy or scary way. I'd just hang around quietly while she got undressed. There's always a silver lining to everything, it seems.

But like I said, I was getting hungry and bored and I had no idea what time it was. So I just went back to my room and laid down on the mattress. Every once in a while I rang the bell. But no one came. Then, I broke out in a cold sweat. How was I supposed to know when 9 o'clock was? Maybe it was past nine right now. I decided that this trial was probably the most important part of my life and that the smart thing would be to just go to the court and wait for it to open. So I ran out and got to the door. But no one was around except the guard.

I asked him what time it was.

“I don't know.”

“Can I go in? I have a case this morning.”

“Perhaps. But not right now.”

“Why not?”

He glared at me.

“Try to enter if you like. But I am strong and fast. I'll chase you.”

I didn't know what to say. A few men in suits came by. They joked with the doorkeeper and he let them in. When I tried to get a look past the door, he slammed it shut in my face.

“Why are you letting all those guys in but not me? I have a case this morning! Probably right now!”

“You should have come earlier.”

“You would have let me in if I'd come earlier?”

“No.”

“Then why should I have come earlier.”

He looked me over.

“You’re a milkman.”

“Right.”

“Your job in customer service has left you jaded. Intolerant. Why don’t you come back when you’re feeling more at ease with your situation.”

I was getting really tired of the guy, and I remembered that I was already dead, so I just walked up to the door, opened it and went in. He just glared at me but didn’t do anything. Not much of a doorman at all, it turned out.

I was in a long stone hallway and the ceiling was so high I couldn’t see it. There was no one around except a police man or security guard standing outside a door. I ran to him. He seemed to be just dozing there.

“I have a case and I don’t know which room it’s in.”

“Name?”

“Howie Coxwell.”

His eyes woke up a bit.

“Coxwell. You’re late. In there.”

He pointed to the door behind him. I opened it and went in. The courtroom was huge. There must have been a hundred people sitting on benches. They all turned and looked at me. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do, but a thin man near the front waved me to him. He looked very unhappy.

The court looked like the pictures I’d seen. There was a woman sharpening knives off to one side. A judge with a hood over his face sat on a tall pulpit up front and some other people were sitting around him writing things down. There was a desk for me and the guy I guessed was my lawyer and another desk for the other lawyer, who was shuffling and playing around with a deck of cards. I sat down beside my lawyer.

“Oh, why did you have to get here late? Oh.” But before I could answer, the judge spoke up.

“And you call yourself a milkman. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

The rest of the morning was taken up with entering various documents into evidence. It sounded like it was going to be a long complicated trial and I was really surprised at how many papers they had. I could hardly understand the complicated legal lingo they were using.

“G3, O5, B6”

“Go fish.”

“Hit me. Hit me.”

“Rummy.”

“J3”

“No.”

“9I.”

“Submarine.”

When it was lunchtime, everyone just stayed where they were. Most took water bottles and sandwiches wrapped in oil paper out and ate in silence. And I had no sandwich. I had no water. So I just sat and tried not to look too hard at any one of the eating crowd. They munched and munched. The knife sharpener stopped sharpening and ate too and the annoying lawyer on the other side finally put down his annoying cards and focused on what looked like a roast beef sandwich. I could smell the swirling odors. Roast beef, like I said. Turkey, tuna, tea, egg salad all mixing together in a sordid miasma of brown paper bags and small hopeless plans.

I could have sworn that I smelled peanut butter and jam. Or maybe, as ungodly as it seems, peanut butter and banana. And it was like a slap in the face. To sit there while someone was just eating a peanut butter sandwich while the whole fate of my entire soul for the rest of eternity was being decided. It made me feel, just...small.

A bell rang somewhere and all of us knew that the time for eating was over. It was time now for the arguments. My lawyer stood up.

“Oh you honor. My client here, sitting there, had undoubtedly been a strict adherent of the *lex lexissimus lactinatorus*. His teeth were brushed by himself. Detinue, replevin and trover. Desuetude. Premeditated Gross Obliquy, first degree.”

He went on and on about my personal hygiene routine, which I’d never thought would carry any weight in determining my future. And then he went on about a bunch of other stuff I couldn’t really follow.

Then the prosecutor lawyer stood up and pointed at me.

“Howie Coxwell is a creature of pure evil. Instead of being a normal boy and doing well at school, he chose, of his own free volition, mind you, to stir up mischief among the living. Many of you might remember that only a few weeks ago, Our dear friend, the mayor of Caberbridge, on one of his usual sojourns to the lands of the living, was, in the innocent form of a muskrat, run down mercilessly by this one.”

I looked over at the jury and they were stony cold. The arguments didn’t seem to have swayed them at all. After a while, he sat down again and picked up his cards. My lawyer tried to explain that I had poor eyesight and that on earth, it’s normal to run over whatever wildlife wanders onto the roads. But all I

could think about was the irritating noise the other lawyer was making with the cards. I looked over, giving one of those ‘do you mind?’ looks. But he just smiled and winked at me. I turned away and tried to focus on the knife sharpener instead. She at least kept her head down and focused on her work. But it was no use. All I could hear was flip flip flip. Was he playing a game? Just shuffling the cards for absolutely no reason at all? Was he just bored to death and couldn’t concentrate on the fate of my everlasting soul? I just couldn’t stand it any more. I stood up and shouted.

“Will you STOP shuffling those god damned cards?”

There were some gasps. My lawyer turned to me, shocked.

“Oh no.”

The judge shouted, “there will be no outbursts in this courtroom.”

The lawyer just kept smiling at me and flipping his stupid cards around. Until all of a sudden he stopped. Everyone in the room felt the door open. It’s like the temperature in the room changed. We all turned to look, but we all somehow knew even before looking that some profound presence had altered the balance of the room.

He was a small tidy man with gold rimmed spectacles. When I saw them I almost doubled over. I’d seen these glasses before, watching me. I felt my soul getting thin and wispy when he looked at me with a faint smile, like I might blow away. I knew that he knew everything about me already and that he knew that I knew that and that I knew nothing whatsoever about him. And for a second it was like there was just me and him in the room. Then, the sound came back to my ears and I heard a hundred whispers from the other court-dwellers.

“STAN.”

Stan walked down the middle of the aisle smiling in a slightly disgusted way at me, like he already knew I hadn’t brushed my teeth for days. He walked right up to the other lawyer, who stood up and dropped his stupid cards all over the floor. Stan said something to the other lawyer that no one could hear except the peckerhead lawyer. And as Stan spoke, the lawyer looked at me. His eyes getting bigger and happier and a goofball smile crossing against his face. Then Stan had a seat on a bench and everyone slid away from him. Then the other lawyer raised his finger in the air and announced.

“Your honor. The prosecution would like to change the charges against Mr. Coxwell to Remorseless Ingratitude. He has work left undone.”

My lawyer looked at me and went pale...

“Bring out the evidence box!”

There were murmurs in the court. The clerk got up and left. Then returned a moment later, pushing a stand on rolling wheels with a box on top. It was strange. It looked like it was made of wood, but there were buttons on the front and most of the front was made of glass.

“The evidence!” he cried.

And then, one of the strangest things I've ever seen happened. The other lawyer pushed a button and then, in front of this big crowd, a bunch of episodes from my life appeared on the glass. It started with me falling in the water with all the cows off the coast of Aftagley. To be honest, it looked a bit funny.

But the lawyer pressed a button and there was a blur and bunch of lines, and there was me sleeping in my room with the little picture of the whale on the wall. Then he pushed the line for a long time and when he stopped, there was me playing in the garbage bin close to my house as a child. Then he went back further and exclaimed with a finger in the air.

"Here we are."

On the screen, I was a baby and I was just a couple of weeks old, sitting on a bench with my mother. It was misty and cold in the pine trees and there was a stone fountain, but I was warm there, wrapped up in a blanket. And for the first time, I could see, and I recognized my mother's face and I smiled, and she smiled back. And I knew that smell and that warmth were from her. I was just a couple of weeks old, but I could see in my mother's eyes that she was tired and I could see that she was so sad. So I giggled and she giggled. And somewhere deep inside me, I promised that I would make her happy.

"A HA!"

The stupid peckerhead shouted, snapping me out of those ancient memories. Then he pointed his finger at me.

"That child made a promise, and, I will show, renewed that promise again and again, until his evil nature made itself as plain as plain could be. Now if this were just some ordinary child laughing and smiling at his mother, I'd never consider him capable of a binding contract. But this young fellow, this one, as you know, was no babe in the woods. He was a Seeker through and through. He knew what he was doing. And has he made her happy?"

And he pushed a button and the picture moved forward to me playing with some blocks and a mechanical egg beater on the floor one evening. I made little towers of blocks and then knocked them down with the egg beater. But my mom was just smoking and looking out the window and the sun was going down over the row houses.

"Is that the behaviour of a man who had pledged his life to making his mother happy?"

A big 'NO!' went up in the crowd, even though a voice in the back of my mind said, 'I was just playing with my blocks.'

"And where is his mother now?"

He pushed more buttons and there was my mom, old and grey, sitting in the same chair looking out the same window, smoking. The cigarette shaking a bit in her fingers.

"And what, pray tell, did Mrs. Coxwell, do for her ingrate of a son?"

And he fiddled with the box again. And there was me, at my own birthday party, with a pile of presents and a magician doing magic tricks, and lots of kids and balloons and cake."

“She organized birthday parties.”

Now, I have to tell you. Everything up to this point, I sort of remembered, of the parts when I was old enough to remember. But this birthday party, I didn’t remember it at all. And I’m pretty sure I never had any of the presents I watched myself opening.

“Lullabies”

And there was my mom signing me the nicest song you ever heard, which was also strange, since I don’t ever remember my mom singing to me or anyone else. As similar images flashed: helping me up onto a pony, me coming home crying and her looking concerned and wiping my tears and then cracking a joke that made me laugh and feel better. I began to wonder. Had I been totally wrong about my mother all these years? Did I push all those memories out of my mind? And why? Maybe I really was a total ingrate. I could feel tears welling up and I fought to hold them back and wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my uniform. The lawyer pointed at me.

“You see how his own body accuses him. Rebelling against his fetid mind.”

And then with a grandiose flourish, he turned off the box.

“Lads and lasses of the jury. You cannot possibly contemplate allowing this person to stay anywhere in our realms, let alone allow him to enjoy himself on the isle of the blessed. He has a contract uncomplete and must walk the earth until it is completed.”

He looked back at the man called Stan and winked. The judge stood up in his pulpit and proclaimed,

“If any man have aught to say of this, let him speak now or forever hold his peace.”

The lawyers and the judge went into a huddle and when they broke up, my lawyer walked back to me looking very pale and afraid. And then the judge bellowed,

“Howie Coxwell, you have been found to be in breach of contract. You are hereby banished from these realms, and you are banished forever. Never shall you be admitted to the isle of the blessed again. You are further sentenced to return and spend the rest of your days making amends for your sin.”

And just like that there was a flash. The first thing I was aware of was how cold I was...freezing....wet. The sand beneath me, like the slab of ice under a cadaver. My legs ached, but I knew somehow that I wasn’t a cadaver. I smelled the sea, rotting kelp, horse manure.

I never noticed before how strange it is that there are seasons. No one but the scientists really understand why it’s cold and then it’s hot and then it’s cold again. The whole time I’d been in the courtroom and Eupalamos, I hadn’t noticed anything at all about the temperature of my body. For the rest of my life after this, whenever it was cold and damp, my legs would ache and get stiff. And I complained about it, but secretly, in my own head, I enjoyed the feeling because I knew that whenever I felt cold and damp and my old milkman’s legs ached...it meant that I was alive. And I knew at this moment that once again, inexplicably, I *was* alive...alive.

The sun was there in the sky. And only slowly could I open my eyes. I saw the grains of sand, up close like I'd never seen them before. Differently colored little stones. Then I felt the sea air in my lungs and I took a deep breath like a baby that just got born. I wanted to swallow every bit of the air around me after being dead and drowned for so long.

Then I noticed that my limbs were still there and I pushed myself up. The rowboat was there. I was somewhere. But not St. Gaff's. It was just a long bank of sand. A strip of an island. Just sand and some grass. A long sliver of sand in the sea. And there, in front of me, staring at me, was a wild horse. I stood up finally. And that's all there was here. Me, my boat. The sea. The sun. Sand, grass. And a herd of wild horses galloping.

But I was alive.

29. No Man is an Island

I breathed in.

The sea air filled my lungs and it was sweet like a mother's first kiss. I almost didn't want to breathe out again for fear that there'd be no air left in the world for me. But air there was. I watched the horses gallop down the beach. They were smaller and shaggier than horses I'd seen on the streets before. A bit more wooly. The horse in front of me just stared. I guessed he was just a bit more curious than the others. I reached out to touch him, to see if he was really real, but he whinnied and then he too galloped off. They looked so free and wild that I wished I could take off down the beach with them. Standing there, I noticed every part of me, my feet on the sand, a warmish breeze, the sound of the waves, the sun behind me, warming my back through my wet uniform.

I don't mind telling you that I was pretty bewildered by everything that had happened to me. It's not every day that you die and it's certainly not every day that you come back. The only lingering effect of being dead seemed to be that I had a bit of congestion.

A warm feeling washed over me. Despite all the things I'd done wrong in my life, the spirits had given me another chance. I was grateful beyond all words. Something like a prayer bubbled up from the deepest parts of me and I made a promise to the sea and the sand and sun that I'd live the right way from now on. I'd learned my lesson for good. I knew now that I had to set things right, and her face was there in front of me. I knew I'd caused her a lot of pain but all of a sudden I knew what I had to do.

Stormy had shared something with me that you should only share with one person and I, like a horrible cad, had failed to ask for her hand right then and there. No wonder she'd run off with McMyrtle. She probably spent every night wondering why I didn't show up with flowers and a ring and she probably felt awful thinking about her future as a lonely old spinster. She'd grow old playing backgammon with McMyrtle as her eyesight failed, watching the sunset through old warbly windows, dreaming of the future that might have been. She'd wanted to fly from St.Gaff's and go on adventures with me, but I had thoughtlessly ignored her.

No more. I'd been sent back and I'd been given a second chance. It was time to make an honest woman of her once and for all. And then it dawned on me that I had no idea where I was. And *then* it dawned on me that this might all be a trick. Maybe this was a spell. Maybe I was still dead and being dead was just a series of weird dreams.

But I reached down and grabbed the sand and squeezed it. It was real. I looked at my hands and my finger was still gone. My fingernails still needed cutting. I figured that if this was a deathdream or a spell, my hands would probably be perfect and nicely trimmed. And I was hungry and thirsty. I got up and walked to the shore. I dipped my finger in the water and tasted it. Salt. And it was cold. This was the sea.

But if this was real and I was on a real island, how the heck was I supposed to get off? The rowboat was there, but which direction was home? I'd been in the channel between the mainland and Aftagley. But the sea stretched out as far as I could see here. The first thing to do was to walk and figure out what else was on this island, or if it was just an island. Maybe this was just a little peninsula jutting out from St.

Gaff's. I hadn't studied the map too carefully, so that was possible. So up the beach I walked, in the same direction as the horses had gone.

As I walked, images came back to me. I'd been on trial. I'd seen the actual St. Gaff. Stan, the man with the gold spectacles, had been watching me. What had it all meant? There was no way of knowing. But I was overwhelmed with being happy to be alive, and desperate to see Stormy and tell her everything. I walked and walked and the landscape never changed. Sun and sea, sand and grass. The only thing that changed was that the sun was sinking. And the warm breeze was getting stronger and colder. There was no end in sight to the beach in front of me. It got darker. And I was starting to shiver. My uniform was not warm.

All of a sudden a horrifying thought gripped me. What if I died again or what if I was stuck here until I died and what if I never got to tell Stormy or anyone else what had happened to me? The image flashed: my mouth open and screaming and no sound coming out. That was my first taste of hell: dying alone and not being able to tell anything to anyone. Not being able to convince anyone that the things I'd seen were real. Everyone would have their own idea about me but they'd be wrong, and I'd be gone and I wouldn't be able to tell them the truth. When I was little, I'd seen my uncle Lorne lying there after a stroke. He couldn't speak. I knew his mind and how active it was and I knew just from the expressions on his face and from his eyes that he had a lot to say. But he couldn't say it. It scared me.

There was nothing here at all. As far as I could see up the beach. I was shivering now and felt more totally exposed to the world than I'd ever been. As it got darker I saw far off to my left, the green particles of the geyser shooting up into the air. But it looked so far off. I'd never seen it so far off and it was just like the green plume of a volcano. I marveled at it as I walked until I nearly bumped into it. I half-screamed. A horse's head. Eyes blue and shriveled. A dead horse's head on a stick. Rotting. Staring balefully at me. I panicked and ran back the way I'd come. The only thing I could think of was to get under the row boat and hide. I ran and ran.

The sun dipped below the horizon. I'd freeze, I knew it. I wouldn't make it to the boat. I knew I'd shiver and wake up stunned and senseless and starving and I'd collapse somewhere on the beach and no one would know what had happened to old Howie the milkman. I'd been brought back to life only to die on the beach like an idiot. But there I saw, on the left, the horses. The horses knew how to fend off the nighttime cold. They had no barn. No trees. They huddled together in the grass to keep warm. Like a lightning bolt I knew what to do. I was feral. I was one of the horses now.

I ran to the horses. When I got close enough, I sort of tiptoed so as not to scare them. Then I got on my hands and knees and crept closer. I could almost feel how warm they'd be with me snuggled up to the sleeping bunch of them. But when I crept close and was about to lie down, one horse, then two stood up and snorted at me. They seemed pretty aggressive.

They pawed the sand and it was pretty clear that they didn't want me there. One dove at me and I decided to leave. Walking backwards. When I was a ways away, The two horses went back to the others. I turned and headed to the shore again. The green on the horizon brighter now in the dark. When I'd slowed down to get close to the horses I'd noticed that I was all sweaty from walking so fast, and with the wind I was really cold now. It wasn't too long before I got to the rowboat. It wasn't too hard to flip the boat over on top of me. And I lay there between the two benches. It was pitch black under there and I was frozen.

I curled up and thought that if I just stayed like this, I'd eventually warm up. I shook on purpose like a kind of shivering to stay warm. I could smell the wood of the boat. I smelled the seaweed and the sand, cold right under my face. My breathing sounded loud in the little space. Even though I was breathing, it was like I couldn't get any air. I wanted to get out and tip the boat over so I'd be able to breathe. But I was so frozen. I breathed deeper trying to suck more air in, but I still couldn't get any. I moved my face to the edge of the boat where there was a bit of space between the sand and the wood, trying to pull in some of the outside air.

Then all of a sudden, the hair on my neck stood up. What was that? A horse? Something was walking around the boat. I figured maybe it just sounded loud because it was so quiet out. But I was afraid to look. It didn't sound like something with four legs and it wasn't making any horse sounds. My eyes had gotten used to the dimness. I could just barely make out, under the edge of the boat, shadows. Something taking steps. I tried to stay quiet, but it was so hard to get any air under here. I kept telling myself it was just an animal sniffing around and that it would get bored and walk away. But then there was a knock. I held my breath to keep quiet. Suffocating. Another knock. Then something moved and I almost screamed. Fingers inched their way under the boat. Right in front of my face. They came closer and I opened my mouth to scream, just as the fingers grabbed the edge of the boat and lifted it.

My face was contorted with terror. Then another face with scraggly long grey hair and horrid breath was right there in front of me, peering under the boat. It screamed and I screamed. The hands retracted and the boat fell down again. I didn't move. Grasping for breath. I heard the thing outside breathing hard too.

"Hello?" said a voice from outside.

"What're you doing under there? Hello?"

"I'm a milkman."

"I'm quite sure I haven't ordered any."

"I was just on a mission and I got lost and washed up here."

"How's about coming out from under there?"

"But who are you?"

"Agnes Currie. Researcher."

I tipped the boat back, got up and straightened out my uniform, trying to hide the shivering. Miss Currie was standing there sizing me up. She had all this long grizzled hair, I like I said and a greasy orange toque.

"You really are a milkman."

"Yes ma'am."

"And a soggy one at that. Well, come on. You'll catch double pneumonia."

She turned and walked off and I followed. My limbs stiff with the cold.

“We don’t get many visitors here.”

“Where are we?”

“Glennmaddie island. There’s nothing here but horses, sand and me. Twenty miles long, three miles across at the widest point.”

“Are we far from St. Gaff’s?”

“About forty miles.”

“How can I get back?”

“Two weeks maybe, I’ll get a supply ship in. You can ride back to the mainland then.”

“What??”

“Looks like we’ll be roomies for a bit. Believe me, it’s not my favourite idea either.”

“Listen, did you see a horse’s head on the beach? Up there a ways? Did you –”

For some reason she stopped. She pinched one nostril and breathed out hard. A stream of snot and boogers flying out from the other nostril. I guess she spent a lot of time on her own. I was having a hard time making sense of what she was telling me. But we walked on until we got to a small wood shack. It looked like the weather had beaten it pretty hard over the years. Agnes Currie pulled the door open and I was pretty surprised to see that the floor inside was sand, like there wasn’t a floor at all. She saw me looking at the ground.

“Been here so long the structure’s sunk straight into the sand.”

She lit a little stove and threw me a smelly wool blanket. At least I’d be warm.

“Have a seat.”

There was only one chair in the room and she sat in it. It was just a two room shack but there were piles of papers everywhere and crates with tins of food. I just sat on one of those.

“So, milkman. What kind of mission were you on that you washed up here?”

“The milkmen have to do a certain amount of reconnaissance to make sure the routes and seaways are clear for any ships with milk. We’re not supposed to talk about it really. And I was just reconnoitering, and a rogue wave must have pulled me under.”

“Uh huh.”

“Well what about you? What’re you doing out here on this island all by yourself?”

“Government research. I’ve been here 43 years by myself. I keep records on the horse population, tides, vessels passing, air quality, insect life. You name it.”

“But why?”

“Government funded research. For science.”

We talked more and she heated up a tin of beans. We each had half the beans and it really didn’t seem to be much food.

“Only got enough for one here, gonna be pretty tough rations the next two weeks.”

Later, I asked, “So why have you been here so long?”

She got a dreamy look in her eyes like she’d been rehearsing her answer for the past 40 years.

“I grew up in Mingsbight. My parents weren’t quite well-to-do, but they weren’t poor either. But I just felt different growing up. All I saw around me in the city was buying and selling and it wasn’t making any one of them happy. They had no guide to living their lives, just greed. I saw that people really didn’t have any solutions to their problems. And I wanted more than anything to help make people’s lives better. Then, when my dad got sick with a rare disease, they had to take him to a university hospital. And there, a very wise doctor had been doing research on his very condition. He tried an experimental cure, potassium dichlorium injections. And to all of our surprise, he pulled through. That’s when I knew. If I really wanted to help people, I had to devote myself to the pursuit of science. And when I heard about an opening here, with the beaches and the wild horses and the possibility of really making a contribution. Well, I just jumped at it. And I’ve been here ever since.”

“And did you make any big discoveries?”

“Hold on” she said and she went into the other room which I guessed was her bedroom, and I heard her unzip her pants and pee into a pot. I couldn’t stand the idea of being stuck here with her for two whole weeks. At least I’d dried off and warmed up a bit in the little shack. Agnes Currie came back in and blew out the lantern.

“Time to hit the hay.”

Then she went back to her room. I had the smelly wool blanket and a horsehair blanket that I laid over a pile of papers like a pillow. Normally I think I wouldn’t have been able to sleep like that, but I just passed right out. And woke with a start with her standing over me and there was lots of light coming in from the window and the cracks in the shack.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“To work. You’re not freeloading here, bub.”

So she made me get up and we went out onto the beach. She made me carry a clipboard with paper and she got me to write down all sorts of things that she noticed. A new family of some rare kind of

caterpillar. A glass bottle from the other side of the ocean. She made me take it with us. She told me she kept meticulous records of every piece of garbage that washed up so the government could map out how the waves went in the ocean. She picked through some horse dung to see what the horse had been eating.

“Grass,” she said.

She took a reading from a stick in the water about the tide and looked at her watch. We took a break at lunch and she heated up another can of beans. She ate it in silence. Chewing each mouthful for a really long time. We didn’t have anything for breakfast. This was really not the life for me. Then we went and counted up the horses. She said every day it was the same routine of looking around the island and keeping very clear scientific records of everything. She made reports that went back to some central department in the capital and eventually they were going to publish her findings either as a series of articles in university journals, or maybe even as a book that would be in the library. Then, when it was getting on towards the late afternoon, we found, in the shade of a dune, a dead horse. Its eyes were open.

“Must’ve died last night. I know this fellow,” she said. Then, one of the most horrible experiences I’ve had. She made me help her drag the horse all the way back to her shack. I grabbed its ankle. It was cold and stiff. She grabbed the other ankle and had to bend it against the rigor mortis to get a good grip.

“Why do we have to pull it?”

“Come on,” she said.

Now, you might never have done anything like this before, but I can tell you, horses are really heavy. Luckily he wasn’t too far from the shack, but still. It was exhausting and gruesome. I tried not to look at the glazed eyes. We finally got to the shack, panting and exhausted. She went into the shack and I heard her rummaging around in there. The stars were coming out now and it was more quiet than anywhere I’d ever been. Except for Miss Currie going through her drawers. She came back out with a cleaver in her hand. The white moon was coming up now.

“What’re you doing?”

“Hold the hoof there.”

“Why?”

“Just do as you’re told.”

I could hardly believe my eyes. I held the hoof and she brought the cleaver down. Then she did it again. She was butchering the thing right there in front of me. I was speechless and totally aghast. Blood splattered all over my uniform. As she chopped and hacked at the thing, her eyes got big and possessed. Horrified, I just dropped the hoof. She gave me a cold hard stare.

“Pick it back up”

And I knew I had to do what she said. She eventually hacked off a good big chunk of its leg. The moon was getting higher. She turned to the moon and held the dripping hunk up to the sky with both hands. Then, in some unfathomable voice, she said some horrendous prayer to whatever god she’d given

birth to out here. When she was done, she brought the flesh to her face. And then bit into it. Hair and all. I couldn't stand it any more and I ran off. I could hear her shouting and cackling to her deity. I didn't stop until I got to the rowboat. I got the oars in place, pushed the boat out and jumped in. I just started rowing. I thought it was probably my imagination, but I thought I could hear, even out on the sea, her weird prayers and the gnashing of teeth on horse bones.

I rowed and rowed. I steered the boat as best I could towards the green glow in the distance. But I was so tired. I decided to row more slowly to preserve my energy. I knew that I had to keep going in a straight line by keeping some object in line. But after a while I couldn't see the sandy island so I had to keep turning around to see where the geyser was and I kept veering off track. I was getting blisters on my hands from rowing. I turned one time to see where I was going and when I turned back, I fell right off the bench.

There was a huge white bird sitting on the stern of the rowboat and he was just looking right at me with these serious looking eyes. He had big craggy brows and a long hooked, accusing beak. I didn't dare move. The bird was as big as me, like an overgrown seagull mixed with a duck. I stared at him and he stared at me. I thought he'd just fly off, but he didn't. The boat was drifting further off course and I had to row. I reached for the oars but the bird pecked at me. It really hurt my arm. Then he just sat back looking at me. I reached for the oar again and he cocked his neck like he was about to peck me again.

"Shooo! Shoo!"

But he didn't budge. As slowly as I could, I grabbed the oar, with the bird following my every move. I wiggled the oar out of the oarlock. The oar was heavy but I swung it at the bird. It flew off, then came back and landed in the same spot. I swung again and the same thing happened. My breathing was heavy. I had to get rid of this stupid bird. I figured I'd been through enough and I really didn't need this stupid bird bothering me. In fact, I was getting mad. I made like I was going to pick up the oar again and it stuck its head in my direction, getting ready to peck at me. But this time my anger got the better of me. I lunged at the bird and grabbed it around its long feathery neck. I squeezed and throttled the air out of the sickening thing. It kicked and flapped its big wings but I closed my eyes and throttled for dear life. Then I bashed its head against the bottom of the boat until it stopped moving.

I sat back on the bottom of the boat, heaving, catching my breath. The bird just lay there, dead. I closed my eyes for a second and just passed out from exhaustion. When I woke up, it was just the beginning of the dawn and I didn't open my eyes right away, still exhausted. But I heard pecking, and when I did open my eyes, I scrambled to the other side of the boat. There was a flurry of wings. A bunch of little birds flew away and I saw. They'd been pecking and eating the big white bird, which was now torn to bits.

It was then that I realized that life in nature is really all about animals ripping each other apart and eating each other in orgies of blood and entrails and dead eyes and I never wanted any part of it ever again. And then I noticed that by some miracle from the gods of the sea, I was floating right into St. Gaff's harbour. It was a ways off still, but I was safe and I was going home.

I grabbed the oars and rowed as hard as I could. I could see the people growing from little specks to little figurines as I got closer. I kept looking behind me to steer. I was desperately thirsty, but there wasn't

a drop to drink, since you can't drink water from the sea. A little crowd formed as I got closer since they must have realized it was the lost milkman making his triumphal return. With the last little bit of energy I had, I pushed the boat to the pier. A few longshoremen and a couple of reporters came to get me. I was so tired I couldn't get out of the boat. And when the others got up to the boat, they all stopped and stared at my gory bloodstained uniform and the dead bird with its beak open like it was going to accuse me. All I remember before passing out was a longshoreman saying,

“Tis a bad omen, it is.”

30. The Message

I looked over and the peckerhead was sweating all over the place. His uniform was a mess. We were both pretty tired from pushing. We weren't all that far from town and it was cool enough that the milk would probably be okay. With the two of us pushing, it wasn't so bad. At least that's what I told the idiot. I was just letting him do most of the work. The stupid milk truck broke down just under a mile from town. We'd just been out delivering milk to old Travis. I guess that's what the bad omen was about.

As we were pushing, I thought back over the past couple of days: the row boat and the fight with the giant bird. Sometimes I wondered how I kept from going under. But then some salty old sailor told me that it was a bad omen that the bird had died in the boat and then gotten eaten by other birds. So strange. Now, normally, I'm not too superstitious, but after the things that had happened to me recently, I began to wonder if the universe held mysteries that were beyond my understanding. Anyways, I got out of the rowboat and told everyone I was fine. They kept asking how I got there, but I just told them it was milkmen business and I couldn't say any more. I walked into town. It was a weekday like any other and everyone was just going about their business. If I hadn't died. If I'd never made it back. They'd be going about the exact same business and I wouldn't even exist at all.

Everything familiar looked brand new to me. The pastel houses just stood there fending off the weather, the paint peeling ever so slowly while over the years people were born in there, made thousands of cups of tea and then died. It seemed like none of them really understood what it was all about. No one looked at me even though I was looking at them. None of them really looked at each other either. There was old Mrs. Doyle digging around in her garden trying to make some flowers grow. I stopped and watched her for a minute. Who was she kidding? She was digging and digging just so she wouldn't have to think about the big heavy curtain that was about the drop down right on top of her whole show.

The pleasant little town was really bothering me. At least in the big city, where people peed in the alleys and mugged each other with bats and knives, you knew what life was all about. And then I thought back about what the judge had said about me, that I was a creature of pure evil. Maybe digging in the garden was the right thing to do and it was actually me that didn't understand what life was all about. Maybe there really was something really wrong with *me*. I started feeling again like I couldn't get enough air, like the town was suffocating me. I was in deep need of spiritual counseling. I made a beeline to the church, after stopping for a quick sandwich at Brixton's.

Oscar was setting up for the few old ladies who came to lunchtime services in the middle of the week.

"Is Father Wheelan in? It's an emergency!"

"He's in back. Just finished his breakfast, I believe."

Father Wheelan was in his office, standing at the little counter with the sink and the holy cups and all of that. He was trying to fold up some linen thing that he wore during services.

"Father Wheelan! I need to talk to you!"

"Howie. You're looking awfully pale. What's the trouble?"

“Something terrible happened. I think I drowned and died and then came back to life.”

He made some sort of mistake with the folding and had to start again.

“Oh for God’s sake. Sounds like an awful dream.”

“No, it really happened. I got my leg caught in a rope in the water and I couldn’t get to the top and I died.”

“Calm down, Howie. Just take a breath. Breathe.”

“Okay...okay.”

He seemed to be getting annoyed. He just tossed the linen aside and turned to face me.

“Just tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Well, when this happened, a judge told me, he said I was a creature of pure evil and that I was bound to walk the earth forever, or until I died, making everyone miserable.”

“You’re not well, Howie. I think you should go lie down.”

He started polishing up a brass cup for the service.

“But it’s true. I’ve done all sorts of awful things. Maybe it’s true that I’m possessed by evil.”

“What evil things?”

I scanned my mind for the right thing to say.

“I lied about being from County Buckle. I’m from Mingsbight and I lied on my application to the milkmen and then I stole the files so no one would find out.”

“Uh huh. I’ve got to get ready for service.”

“No. There’s more. I’ve hurt people. Really hurt them.”

He paused what he was doing and looked at me with a solemn look.

“We all hurt those we love at some point or other. It’s nothing to do with evil. A lot of the things we do, you know, they’re the result of earlier experiences. If, say, someone had a bad childhood and was mistreated by their parents, why that explains their negative behaviour later in life. Or, if someone just isn’t that smart when they’re born, well it’s just a natural fact that they won’t make good decisions. The mind, we now know, is like a clock. And if some of the gears get broken, or they weren’t made properly, well, the mechanism just won’t work properly anymore. But, as the Whaler taught us, we must offer our understanding and forgiveness to those who wander off the path. But the idea that there’s some incorporeal force of evil that takes hold and makes you do bad things, demonic possession, that’s just nonsense. There’s nothing in the world but bodies, Howie.”

As he was talking, I slumped down in the chair. I could hardly keep my eyes open. I'd hardly slept for a couple of days at least, and I was truly exhausted.

"You really don't seem well, Howie. I'd go see Dr. Barrett if I were you...Oscar!"

I vaguely remember stumbling out of the church and Oscar catching me. Then we were on the sidewalk and I couldn't stand up straight and Oscar was helping me along. Then, the smell of crisp fresh linen and the nice feeling of lying down when you're exhausted. And there was Dr. Barrett looming over me. The next thing I knew, it was morning. The sun was up and I felt a lot better. Dr. Barrett was doing something with some test tubes and beakers and pumps.

"Ah! He is risen!"

"How did you know??"

"I saw your eyes open."

"Right. What are you doing there?"

"A hobby of mine. I'm interested in theories of the vacuum. They used to think there was no such thing as a vacuum. That space was filled with etherios."

"Oh."

"So what happened? You were exhausted. Dehydrated. They told me you washed up in a rowboat?"

"I'm not really sure what happened. I was on a mission. A secret one. And I fell in the water and then I was here."

"I see. You're essentially fine. You'll have to take it easy for a couple of days. I'll be happy to speak with Mr. Corwin about it. I know he can be difficult."

"Thank you doctor."

He struck a little flint sparking device and lit the burner, holding a beaker above it.

"Scientists now think that sound cannot travel through a vacuum."

"Oh."

"Do scientists think there's such a thing as ghosts?"

He thought about this.

"It's a good question."

Just then Naomi came in.

"Ah, Naomi. Could you go make some breakfast for our patient here?"

"Sure, Doctor."

And she left.

“She’s begun apprenticing for me.”

“But as I was saying, there are theories about a spiritual realm. If we’d evolved in a place with no air, if we lived in a vacuum tube, we wouldn’t need ears because there’d be no sound. See? But maybe some mutations would allow some people to hear in those spaces where there might be traces of sound. Similarly, some otheosophists claim that most of us simply lack the faculties to perceive the spiritual realm that exists all around us. That the evolutionary imperative to survive meant that we only perceive those things that have to do with survival and that we’re simply blind to large swaths of reality around us.”

“Does that mean that we can’t tell if things are good or evil?”

He straightened up.

“Yes, I suppose the existence of things such as good or evil, things we can’t measure or perceive, might well be just as real as height or extension or light if we had the right organs. But we see as if through unwashed windows, murkily.”

Not too long after Naomi came in with some tea and toast with butter, which I ate and then fell asleep. I woke up to Beaver standing weirdly with his hat in his hand.

“Corwin needs to see you right away. Sick or not sick, he says.”

I felt a lot better after sleeping again, as I found out later, for about 16 hours. I went outside with Beaver.

“So is Mr. Corwin upset because I missed work? I was on a mission, you know. It went south and all hell broke loose. I was pretty beat up and you can ask Dr. Barrett.”

“Got a letter for you.”

“From who?”

“Find out when we get there.”

I went in alone. In Corwin’s office I saw something I’d never seen before. Mr. Corwin looked to me to be ever so slightly uncomfortable.

“We received this in the mail, Howie. It’s from the Department.”

From behind his desk he pulled out a bag that looked like it was made of rubber.

“It came right from the top. For your eyes only, apparently.”

He handed me the bag. I untied the rope and reached in. There was just an envelope. When I took it out, I thought I heard a slight gasp from Corwin. The letter had gold edging on it, and there was my name: Howie Coxwell. Corwin stood up and tried to come around to look as I opened it.

“Didn’t it say for my eyes only?”

“Give me that,” and, somewhat rudely, Mr. Corwin took the letter right out of my hands. Then he read aloud.

“Mr. Coxwell, you are to report within three days to the Department of Lactic Affairs Experimental Labs at the Main Station, Mingsbight. You are hereby promoted to Milkman, Red Badge, First Class, Pay Grade M-6. Your transfer orders are enclosed.”

Mr. Corwin looked the letter over.

“This came directly from Stan.”

He looked miffed and shocked.

“What’s this about, Howie??”

“I don’t know!”

“I’ve never even seen Stan and he’s sending messages directly to you?”

“I don’t know! Honest! I’ve never seen him either.”

“Okay, Howie, it looks like you’re leaving us. And getting a pretty good bump in pay. You’ll have to find your own accommodations, I suppose.”

He just stood there thinking. But I could hardly believe my ears. It was finally happening. I’d been promoted again and I was moving to Mingsbight! I was going to return home a hero. I could just imagine myself now, going by my old school, all the kids running up to me. ‘Look it’s Howie!’ they’d say. And I’d hand out quarters to them all and tell them that with enough hard work anything was possible and –

“You take the rest of the day to pack. Report back here in the morning. I’m going to bring McMyrtle in. He’ll have to take over your route. You go with him tomorrow and make sure he’s up to the task.”

Back home, I looked around my place and realized that I didn’t have all that much to pack. A few sets of clothes. The book Corwin gave me that I never read. I’d been daydreaming about my new life on my walk back and now that I was here, the place looked small and shabby. Stormy never liked my room anyways...Stormy. What was I going to do about Stormy? I’d been sent back from the grave and I’d vowed to do right by her.

Maybe this message from the department was all part of a divine plan. Now Stormy could finally leave here and go to Mingsbight like she’d always wanted. But she was shackled up with McMyrtle. My first thought was to go right over there and tell her about the big promotion. But then I decided I’d better hold off and think about the right words to tell her. And how was I going to get her away from McMyrtle? I walked over to the window.

There was the view I spent so many hours in the evenings watching. I thought back to the first time I'd seen it and how exciting it was to be starting on a new chapter of my life. But now, I felt as though I'd outgrown the place and like everything about St. Gaff's was part of my past. I didn't quite feel sad or nostalgic about it yet. I went out for a walk to see everything for one of the last times. But it just felt like any other day. I didn't tell anyone I was leaving. I just wandered around trying to soak the place up so I'd have a clear memory of what it was all like. I popped into Mel's for a haircut. I didn't want to show up at the main station looking disheveled after all.

"I guess you heard about Granard, then?"

"No. He's not living with you any more?"

"No sir, he's not. He was flat broke. He borrowed from the bank to buy the materials for that chip stand. When that whale wrecked it, that was about it for him. Sold everything he had and bought tickets to Mingsbight."

"I'll definitely miss his sandwiches. Father Wheelan must be pretty unhappy."

"I suppose so."

That night as I lay in bed, the old familiar knocking started. That's when I really started feeling like I might miss the place. I wanted to do something nice for my neighbour. So I got up and took my favourite picture of the little boat off the wall. I went next door and knocked.

"Hello?"

"I'm moving away in a few days, and I wanted to give you something to remember me by."

I handed her the picture and she took it.

"Thank you."

I felt like I'd done my good deed for the day. But the banging continued as usual.

In the morning, I went down to the station. I wondered if I'd have to get up so early for my new position. It was probably an office type job, so I'd be able to just lounge around at home for a while and drink coffee and read a newspaper before heading in. I wondered if I'd miss the early morning walks. One thing I wouldn't miss was the peckerhead McMyrtle who was standing by the truck waiting for me.

"Looks like we're partners for today!"

"Yeah."

I jumped in and so did he. We made our way to the cottage down the coast road.

"Well, Travis. It looks like McMyrtle here's going to take over the route. I've been transferred to Mingsbight."

I could have sworn that a look of relief crossed his face.

“I’m sure you’ll be missed. Office job is it?”

“I think so. Advanced experimental research. They need someone with real world experience back at HQ.”

“Just remember what I told you. Stay on this side of the ground.”

And he winked. Travis was a nice guy. I decided to give him some advice too.

“Sure thing, Travis. And make sure you stay away from the milk station. The milkmen have their eye on you.”

And I winked too. He looked a bit startled. The peckerhead didn’t know what we were talking about. And like I mentioned earlier, we didn’t make it much past our first stop at Travis’ place. So we were pushing the stupid truck along and the idiot decides to start talking about Stormy, just to pass the time.

“I think it only fair to tell you that I plan on asking for Stormy’s hand pretty soon.”

My first instinct was to punch him in the face. But I decided to keep my cards closer to my chest.

“Are you gonna move into your own place with her?”

“I was thinking we’d move into her old place.”

“So let me ask you. Your parents don’t mind you guys sleeping in the same room every night?”

“Same room? We have separate rooms...we’re not married *yet*.”

“You mean you guys never...”

“Never what?”

“You know.”

“No! She’s not like that.”

“Oh. Okay.”

We were pushing harder now, getting the truck up a little hill just by the first houses.

“Did...something happen when you were with her?”

“Oh, something happened all right.”

We were just about at the top of the hill.

“What?”

“A gentleman never tells.”

“You tell me right now!”

But the truck was over the hill and I had to run and hop in before it got away from us. McMyrtle hopped in too and we coasted as far as we could.

“You tell me what happened.”

“No.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Look, whatever intimate moments we had together are between me and her, okay?”

He just got all quiet. I could tell he was pretty steamed. But I felt a lot better since I thought they’d been fooling around all this time. We eventually got a new truck and made the rest of the rounds. It was pretty awkward, but what did I care? The only thing is that I was thinking of going over to McMyrtle’s place to try to talk to her after work. But now that seemed like a bad idea. I kept remembering that nice shiny rifle McMyrtle owned. I bet the peckerhead couldn’t even shoot straight, but still. I’d have to think of a different strategy. Maybe I’d write her a letter from Mingsbight with a ferry ticket or something like that.

Anyways, after dinner I kept thinking and thinking about what to do. I couldn’t sleep. So I went out for a walk to commune with the moon and think about things. It was a perfect night with perfect stars and just a bit cool. Perfect thinking weather. I thought back about the first times I’d seen Stormy with her rose bushes. And about all the biscuits in the backyard. Those were good and wholesome times. How could anyone say I was a creature of pure evil? I’d made my share of mistakes, I’ll admit. But can anyone who loves moments like those truly be evil? I was beginning to think the whole thing with the court was just a dream after all. I’d done some bad things, but deep down I’m a good person. And there was Stormy’s old house. All dark as usual alongside all the other more lit up houses. I stood there looking at the place. Stormy accused me that one time of being a peeping Tom. I just stood there wishing she’d show up and that we’d talk.

I remembered what the kids back home used to say. If you break a window in an abandoned old house, you get to make a wish. So I picked a rock up from the garden, took aim and threw. I won’t tell you what I wished, but I will tell you that it came true almost right away. As I stood there making my wish, I saw a light come on. A match, then a candle. And then, there was Stormy in the window.

“Howie?? What are you doing there?”

“Me? What are you doing there?”

“This is my house! Why did you break the window? Why are you lurking around out there?”

“Still just a peeping Tom, I guess. You must have heard by now. I got the big promotion. I’m headed for Mingsbight tomorrow. All the hard work paid off.”

“So you got what you wanted after all.”

“I sure did. Hey, Why aren’t you at McMyrtle’s?”

She gave me a dirty look and closed the window without saying anything else. I went up and knocked on the door, but she wouldn't answer. I probably could have kicked the door down or broken another window and gone in, but I thought that would probably just make things worse. So I just kept on with my walking.

I wandered down to the harbour. I was alone. I had a bit of a knot in my stomach and I didn't know if this was the moment when everything was going to work out for me and Stormy or if it was just going to fall apart for good. I knew now that life doesn't always work out like the stories. Sometimes it takes longer for things to work out the right way.

And then, far out at sea, there was a green flash. I thought I heard a whalesong and before I knew what I was doing I was out in the sea swimming. It was cold, but the water was calm and I swam with a burst of energy that seemed to keep me warm. I was swimming out like I was under a spell and had no choice. The emerald stars seemed so bright reflecting in the sea with the moon. And there was the Falena, coming towards me. It was magical. When I got close, I stopped swimming and floated there, enchanted until it opened its gaping maw. I was being sucked in. I turned, and tried to swim away, but of course it was no use.

I was sucked down into the entrails of the beast, but somehow I could breathe and I could see through the whale out to the stars and moon. I felt the big fish dive and the stars got dimmer and dimmer under all the water. I was lying on a bed of guts and couldn't move...the deeper we went the less I could breathe. And then there was a stream of little dead fish and bits of plants the Falena must have eaten. It was filling up the stomach. I screamed but no sound came out. Until all the muscles around me started heaving and contracting. And before I knew what was happening I was in the middle of the sea in a huge muddy cloud. When it cleared I just caught a glimpse of the green glowing whale as it swam off and I stuck there as if in space by myself and I couldn't even tell which direction was up.

In the blackness, I swam. I half-expected, and then almost wanted, to see some dead relatives chasing after me with bloody clouds pouring out of their heads. But it was just me alone with no sounds and no voice.

When I came to, I was passed out on the wharf with the light pouring down from the moons and stars. And Stormy was there standing over me.

"Did they really force you to put the radio there?"

"You really think I would do something like that? How did you know I was here, anyways?"

"You were screaming."

She was just quiet for a while, looking at me.

"Albert kicked me out. He told everyone about...you and me. Everyone's giving me dirty looks. I couldn't stand it at Stanley's grocery. The cashier? They way she took my money like it was...dirty."

A poetic feeling came over me and I knew this was one of those memories that you'll always want to remember. I stood up in the moonlight.

"This place is no good for people like us, Stormy. We can't just sit around raising cats and getting old while the moons go around and around overhead."

She looked up at me like I'd said the right thing, so I went with it.

"We were meant for adventure. The big city. I'm gonna shake the dust of this crummy old town off my pants and I'm gonna see the world."

She looked like she was really getting into what I said. So I decided to try for a home run.

"And Stormy, I want you to come with me."

She broke down in tears and I got closer and wrapped my arms around her.

"I can stay with you?"

"Of course. We can stay with my mother until we find our own place."

She looked up at me with a bit of worry in her eyes.

"Don't worry, I'm just about 19. My mom won't mind us staying in my room together."

As we stood there, looking out to sea, a green flash lit up the sea a few miles out. After that, it was all like a dream that you only remember in bits and pieces. Me throwing my clothes in a bag and Mrs. Sommertag pointing at the wall where the painting used to be. Stormy dragging a big trunk down to the pier. Me buying tickets.

Then we were on the deck watching the sun set. We'd taken the overnight ferry and we'd be in Mingsbight at the crack of dawn. It felt like we were married and starting off our new lives together. And Stormy seemed at times to be sad and aloof, but I guess she had a lot of memories and leaving St. Gaff's was harder for her. But as the hours wore on – and there was no question of us sleeping on such a fateful night – Stormy started to lighten up and even get excited. She talked about buying women's shoes and walking down the sidewalk like she had somewhere important to be. I told her about some of the places we could visit downtown and I could see the visions of a new exciting life opening up for her.

"We can buy a radio! We can listen to Eliza Pike every week!"

Then, somewhere in the early hours, we saw flashes of lightning far off in the distance. It lit up the mainland. We could almost make out the buildings of some village. There was a rainy storm over the mainland, but we were dry here.

"The first time I see it. My whole life I wanted to leave and go to the mainland."

Then she got teary eyed.

“I was born in a storm. That’s where I got my name. My dad said there was so much lightning they were worried it would hit the house and burn it down. And now I’m finally here. But he’s gone and I’ll never get to tell him my first glimpse of the mainland was all lit up by a lightning storm.”

And she just broke down and wept in my arms. We didn’t say much for a long time. But when the sun was coming up, she cheered up, too. We were pulling in slow to the town. We watched in the red morning light as the church towers and tall buildings went past. Stormy was entranced and I felt happy that I could bring her here to my home town. It was like I was showing her a part of myself and bringing her to a big wide world she’d always wanted to see. I held her close and remembered what a wise man once said.

No man is a failure if people love him.

It was a perfect moment of happiness. We docked. I got my bag and Stormy got her trunk. We made our way off the ferry. Tired but happy. And then there was a paperboy there trying to sell *The Mingsbight Comet* to the people getting off the boat. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw my mother’s picture on the front page. And there was the headline: *Did Howie Murder his Father? YES, says MOM*

31. The Same River

“Your money’s no good here.”

“Oh, okay.”

I put my money back in my pocket and turned and went back to where Stormy was waiting for me with her trunk and my bag.

“He said my money’s no good here. I guess I must be getting pretty well-known here too.”

“But he didn’t give you the newspaper.”

“No.”

“So doesn’t that mean he doesn’t want your business?”

“Maybe.”

Then she pointed to a coffee shop on the corner.

“Let’s get some breakfast. I’m starving.”

We dragged our stuff over to the shop. It was just a dingy little spot, but probably Stormy would be impressed since she’d never been to big city restaurants before. Just as we were about to drag the trunk in, a waitress appeared at the door.

“You can’t bring that in here.”

“Can we just leave it here while we eat?” I asked.

“No,” Stormy said, “someone’ll steal it!”

“The trunk? Okay, fine, can we get something to go? How much is an egg sandwich?”

“I can getcha a sandwich to go. Two Hudsons each. You want coffee?”

As she was standing in the doorway, telling us about the sandwiches, I saw, peeking out from inside, a dark brown rabbit, except with one huge bulging eye. It was twitching and looking right at me. I wasn’t even following what the woman was saying.

“So? You want coffee, too?”

“Wait. Two Hudsons?”

“You just got off the ferry? They changed the money. We can’t take Ruperts anymore. Just Hudsons.”

The rabbit hopped around her feet and up the road a ways. Then looked back at me for a second and hopped off.

“So what are we supposed to do?”

“Gotta go to a bank. See if they’ll change your Ruperts over.”

We had to drag all our stuff the few blocks from the harbour to where all the bank towers were downtown. The trunk was really a pain. It was a strange morning. The sun had come up, but the sky was still pretty dark. It was as if there was some kind of greasy black soot in the air. I’d never seen that before. The bank towers loomed up ahead of us, shrouded in the ashen fog. And to tell you the truth, they didn’t even look like they used to somehow. We passed another paper boy with that grainy picture of my mother on the front.

“Howie, what’s that story all about?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing. You know how reporters make things up. They probably just talked to my mom and blew things way out of proportion. She’s getting old by now.”

“So what did happen to your dad?”

“He died. It was awful and sad. But I had nothing to do with it.”

She just kept looking at the ground thoughtfully as we dragged our stuff. She was probably thinking about how her own dad was dead and about how we had that in common now. I didn’t say anything.

“Mom’ll make us a nice breakfast with tea and everything. You’ll see.”

“Sure.”

Stormy was still looking so distant. I guess this was all a big change for her. But this was my home town. I couldn’t wait to show her all around and introduce her to everyone. She was going to be so impressed. It occurred to me: we could take a taxi to my mom’s place instead of dragging our luggage all the way.

Men in suits were walking all around in a big hurry. Weaving around the homeless people huddled on subway grates. There were all kinds of smells. Breakfast cooking, stinky unwashed bodies, steam coming up from underground vents. It seemed busier and dirtier than I’d remembered. I thought I saw again, that rabbit watching me from under some old newspapers on the sidewalk. But then he was gone. Finally we got to the front of one of the big bank buildings.

“You stay here with the stuff. I’ll go change the money.”

Stormy seemed really uneasy about the whole thing.

“Don’t worry. No one’s gonna bother you. I’ll just be a minute.”

Her money was all in a bank in St. Gaff’s and she had to fill out some kind of paperwork to get it. They were giving her a hard time because there was no official death certificate for her father. He was just a missing person and of course the police weren’t admitting to shooting him. But anyways, I went in.

“You’re very lucky, young man. Today’s the last day we’re doing exchanges. Okay, 500 Ruperts, that’s 50 Hudsons.”

That seemed a bit unfair to me, but I didn’t want to seem like an idiot, so I didn’t say anything. I told Stormy it was all sorted and that we should find a cab. So we dragged our stuff along the sidewalk. There weren’t any cabs around. We passed a giant machine under a glass dome. It had all sorts of moving parts and it was spitting out a long paper tape with letters and numbers on it. A bunch of men in suits were standing there staring at the thing, some writing numbers down. Every once and a while, one would run away like his pants were on fire.

I’d been downtown before but it all seemed different. Weirdly grey. I didn’t recognize the buildings. They all seemed to loom over us like angry teachers who’d caught us being bad. And the greasy smoke seemed thicker now that we were inland from the sea. Where once I’d walked these streets full of curiosity like an explorer, now every step I took on my own seemed full of menace and threats. I thought I heard giant mechanical clocks ticking everywhere

“Isn’t that a taxi?” Stormy said.

“No, they’re yellow.”

“It says taxi.”

“Oh. Maybe.”

We dragged the trunk over to a big black car that did in fact say taxi on the top. I guess they’d changed the colors of the cabs while I’d been gone. Luckily, it had a big enough boot that we were able to get the trunk in, with some rope holding it in place.

“150 Talbot st., Cabbie!”

He didn’t say anything, but we drove off. Stormy and I were in the back. It was a powerful car. When he roared off, it felt good being pushed back into the seat. I reached over and took Stormy’s hand. She looked out the window and I could tell she was really loving soaking up the new place she’d always wanted to go.

“The only way to travel!” I said, trying to sound excited.

I looked out my side. We were coming up to the bridge and I rolled the window down to feel the breeze. I took a deep breath. There was some strange stink in the air, but the wind felt nice anyways. I looked out over the river Kiersten – for the first time from a car window – but in the weird dark light, the river looked black. Just the angle of the sun, I’m sure, I thought. I could have stayed in that cab all day just watching the world go by out the window. It looked at times like it might rain. But it never did. And then, much too soon, we pulled off the main road and made our way along the familiar old row houses. We got out and the driver undid the rope and helped me get the trunk out.

“28”

“What?”

“28 Hudsons.”

I fumbled with the new money. I only had 50 to begin with and that was all my savings. It made me break out in a cold sweat to suddenly be so broke. But we were home now and I was going to start getting paid more pretty soon. Stormy looked worried, like she didn't quite believe that I knew what I was doing.

“We'll be fine, Stormy. Soon as we get settled.”

But there we were in the road. It almost seemed like more of an alley to me after the wide open spaces on St. Gaff's. It was narrow. Just the road, which was hardly big enough for the cab to drive down, and two asphalt sidewalks. No lawns. The doors opened right onto the sidewalks. But this was home! I thought I'd feel all sorts of nostalgic feelings, but I didn't. Stormy didn't look too impressed either. She looked sort of the way Ryan looked when Mr. Corwin told him he'd be spraying for flies for the foreseeable future. But I tried to sound chipper anyways.

“Finally here! Mom's going to be so surprised!”

So we got the luggage over to the front door and I knocked.

“Come in, it's not locked.”

I opened the door. I'd forgotten the smell. The everpresent cloud of stale smoke that wafted into your face. That smell brought back all the times I'd opened that door after school. Coming home from awful sandwiches and no one caring what happened to me. And then I was home where I told myself things were different. It was a smell of loneliness in company. A cocoon of something that seemed like safety and shelter. But deep down somewhere, I knew I was just on my own. But that was all a long time ago now and I was sure things had changed.

I walked into the gloom. It was dark. Mom was sitting just where she was the last time I'd seen her, at the little white card table beside the window. The ashtray overflowing. Her with cigarette in hand. As a kid I'd always wondered what it was she thought about looking out that window. It just looked out into the little concrete backyard and the fence to the neighbour's yard. I expected her to jump up, or drop her cigarette, or shriek or anything except what she did do. She just turned, and, like I'd just been out later than usual one night, exclaimed.

“Howie. You're back. Who's that with you.”

She didn't even get up. I guess she was getting tired in her old age.

“This is Stormy. She's my fiancée.”

“What? I'm not...we're not —”

“Fiancée. That's wonderful to hear, Howie. Nice to meet you. I read about you in the papers. You've been doing well.”

“Sure I have! Sure I have. So you probably heard that I'm a milkman now. Well, I did such a good job, they sent me here for a job at the Department of Lactic Affairs.”

“Good for you, Howie.”

“I saw a funny thing in the paper too, mom. Today. Did you get interviewed by some journalists?”

She thought about this a moment.

“Yes, the newspapermen came around.”

“Did you...what did you tell them about...me and dad?”

“Oh, I can’t remember now.”

“Okay, well, listen, Stormy’s pretty tired out from the trip. We’re going to stay for a while, until we can find our own place. We can just stay in my room. Come on, Stormy, let me show you”

I started up the stairs, but now my mom jumped up.

“Oh...I didn’t think...I’m afraid that’s not...”

Stormy was with me and we got to the top.

“You can’t stay here, Howie. I’ve got a boarder now.”

I’d gotten to my room and opened the door to my room at this point. I looked back at her and it felt weird to be so close to my mother’s face just then. I noticed she had long deep lines now on the sides of her mouth. I looked in my room and it looked just like when I’d left. It looked like a kid’s room, really.

“Yes, I had to take Joe as a boarder after you left.”

“But my room looks just the same.”

“Joe came with no furnishings and he was happy enough with yours.”

“But you can ask him to leave now.”

“I can’t do that. Where would he go?”

I felt a little ill at all of this. I looked at my mother, into her eyes, but those blue grey eyes I’d looked into since I was a baby, they didn’t look the same. There was something piercing and vacant. And it didn’t feel like I’d come home at all.

“Howie, let’s just go. We’ll find somewhere else,” Stormy said.

I guessed she didn’t really like the way things were shaping up here. But how were we going to find a place with no money?

“It’s probably best if you did go, son. Joe’ll be back soon. He’s just out to get some onions.”

Then she looked us both over again.

“Oh, I just remembered. On second thought, why don’t you hold on a moment and I’ll make you some tea. It’s all just a bit unexpected. Just hold on a second.”

Then she picked up the phone, which was definitely a new fixture in the house.

I thought I heard a voice on the phone: “East Mingsmight Police, 36 Division.”

Then my mother responded.

“Oh, hello, I just wanted to say that *the celery is fresh.*”

And then that little voice again. “You mean? Is this?”

“That’s right, the celery is fresh.”

And then she hung up.

“Just a neighbour.”

Stormy whispered in my ear, “That was the police. Let’s get out of here.”

“Mom...did you just call the police?”

“No, dear. Just have a seat and I’ll put the water on.”

Stormy tugged at my arm.

“It’s okay, mom, I have to report to the department today. They hate it when we’re late.”

“You visit anytime, though. And so nice to meet you, dear.”

And just like that, there we were. Out on the street.

“Your mom is really weird, Howie.”

“She’s just getting old and confused, I think.”

“Well we’d better get out of here. What are we gonna do with this stupid trunk?”

She was right, if my mom had accidentally called the cops, they’d be here soon and we couldn’t drag this thing all over town. I saw Mrs. Albermarle a few doors down watering the flowers in her window box.

“Hello! Mrs. Albermarle! How are you?”

“Howie! I haven’t seen you for a dog’s age. And is this your cousin Caroline?”

She was always a bit daft.

“No, Mrs. This is my fiancée, Stormy.”

“Are you sure? She’s the spitting image of Caroline.”

“Really, it’s not her, Mrs. But, could you do us a bit of a favour? I’m locked out of the house just now and we need to leave this trunk somewhere for a bit.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is. Could we leave it at your place for a few hours? Maybe overnight? We wouldn’t want to leave it in the road, you know.”

“No, no. Not the way things are going around here. Why, sure come on in and drop off your trunk.”

We pushed the thing inside and then into her living room so it wouldn’t block the hallway. Just as we came out, two bobbies came around the corner. We both saw them, turned the other way and tried to walk away as inconspicuously as possible. I suppose they were looking for just me rather than a couple, because they didn’t go after us. Just as we turned the other corner, I heard them knocking on my mom’s door.

“Let’s just get down to the department.”

So we started our slow walk down town. It was probably getting to be about noon. But I figured I had until the end of the day to report to the department and I just couldn’t wait to show Stormy all around the places of my youth. So I took a roundabout way, since she wouldn’t know the difference anyways. We swung by my old school and I told her all about the time the soldiers were everywhere when the war was really bad.

“And that’s where the lunch lady yelled at me for spitting on someone, which I didn’t do. But I still had to spend a week in the principal’s office for detention. It was really awful.”

“Howie, I’m starving. Can’t we go somewhere to get something to eat?”

“There’s nowhere to eat around here.”

And there was the gas works. The sour smell brought me the first feelings of nostalgia I’d been hoping for. But a couple blocks later, the feelings were gone, replaced by the gloom of the sooty air. When we started getting close to downtown, we spent almost the last of my money on two sausages in buns. Stormy had never had street meat like this and I showed her how to put mustard all over it.

Before long, we were back among all the big buildings. The plan had been for Stormy to lie down and get some rest at my mom’s place while I came down to report for duty. She was pretty tired out, poor thing. I was tired too after hardly sleeping last night, but I was used to it anyways. But then something awful occurred to me: I had no idea where the department was. I’d just assumed it was around here somewhere.

“What do you mean you don’t know where it is?”

“I wasn’t a milkman before I left. Why would I care where the Department of Lactic Affairs headquarters was?”

“I’m sure someone will know.”

"Know what?" Someone hissed.

We looked around but didn't see anyone.

"Down here."

I looked down, and there was a window to what I guess was a basement, half above ground and half in a little dug out space. There were bars over the window, red from rust or old paint. And there was a smiling face down there - big eyes and a black beard with white smiling teeth. There were a bunch of cigarette butts all around the window. I guess he came to the window to smoke when he was taking a break.

"Whacha lookin for?"

"The Department of Lactic Affairs."

"What? Lean down a bit so's I can hear you."

"Howie don't."

"It's fine" and I leaned down, "The Department of Lactic Affairs."

He started laughing like some sort of idiot.

"The Department of Lactic Affairs? It's only just right behind you!"

I stood up and turned around, and sure enough we just hadn't noticed it. It was a towering building, maybe 12 or 14 stories made of gleaming white stone. Maybe marble. It looked even whiter since the sky was all dark with the bad air. I was awed. It was like a bottle of milk standing defiantly in the face of an inky, black sky.

"You're going to work in there?"

Stormy was completely impressed and I flushed with pride.

"Yes I am, Stormy."

The guy in the window hissed again.

"PSST, hey, Howie. How's about a tip for helping a guy out?"

We just walked off towards the building, drawn to it like kids are drawn to big balls of cotton candy.

Inside the lobby, everything was even more gleaming white than outside - even the floor was white marble. There were milkmen guards with epaulets and gold tassels standing at the front doors. And there was a milkman sitting at a big white desk. There was no one else there and he shouted over to us.

"How can I help you folks?"

"I'm a milkman. Howie Coxwell, Milkman Red Badge, First Class. I'm reporting for duty, sir."

He frowned and looked through some papers on his desk.

“Mr Coxwell. Now I recognize you. From the papers. Good to meet you.”

He walked out from behind the desk and shook my hand.

“You saw today’s paper?”

“Oh, sure. But not to worry. You are a milkman after all.”

“I’m his fiancée. Stormy. Nice to meet you.”

“You’re a lucky man, Howie. Very nice to meet you miss.”

“Can we go see Howie’s office?”

A frown appeared on the guy’s face.

“Office? I was just about to ask. What are you doing here, Howie?”

“I was told to report to the Department of Lactic Affairs today.”

“No, you were supposed to report to the Department of Lactic Affairs Experimental Labs today”

“You mean that’s not here?”

“Oh, no no no...It’s quite a ways away.”

“Where is it? Am I too late?”

“It’s pretty far. You just follow the river west and you can’t miss it. I’m not sure when they close over there.”

“Come on, Stormy!”

And I pulled her with me as I ran out the door.

So we started off. I knew where the river Kierston was, of course. When we got there, I was astonished to see that it hadn’t been a trick of the light. The water really had turned black. I used to see men fishing there, but no one was there now. We walked alongside the gloomy waters and towards the late afternoon sun.

“You’re working at an experimental lab? Not the main office?”

“It sure looks that way.”

She looked out over the river with sadness in her eyes. She was missing the big picture.

“But remember. I’m getting a big raise. We’re going to have a place of our own. together.”

But somehow she still looked sad.

We walked in silence for a long time, up through the downtown into a crummy area with broken down apartment buildings, and then into a leafy residential neighborhood with nice houses, and then out across some railway tracks and then we were in a mostly industrial zone. There were houses here and there and brown brick low rises. A few diners here and there, but otherwise it was warehouses and workshops. It was getting cool out with the sun almost down and we didn't have coats or sweaters or anything.

And then in the distance we saw it. Actually we heard it first. A constant deep thumping. Some huge machine pounding away over and over again. And there was a tangle of smokestacks and pipes and metal tubes running between a bunch of big dark buildings. This, no doubt about it, was the source of all the black sooty air. It was being spewed out of the industrial complex that was the Department of Lactic Affairs Experimental Labs. In the gloaming the factories looked demonic. Like they'd opened up the earth to a little slice of hell. But there must have been more going on than just laboratories up there. As we got closer we heard the lowing of cows. We could smell them too. There were huge pens full of cows. They seemed to stretch on forever.

We didn't talk much. There wasn't much to say in this blighted place. I decided it would be better if I went in on my own. So we found a little diner and she sat down at the bar and ordered some coffee and pie. I left her the rest of the money and I left her there.

Outside it felt cold and I felt like I was the only living being on earth. Exposed to the elements and about to discover my fate. And there again was the rabbit. Bulging eye and everything. Hopping along towards the entrance. And from every shadow I thought I saw little wingless birds cocking their heads to eyeball me. I thought they were maybe all bouncing along, following me behind my back. And eventually I got close enough to read what was written over the entrance gate: *Unto the pure, all things are pure.*

32. The Stakes

“Hello?”

I shouted, but there was no one around, so I pushed the gate. It moved so I pushed more.

“Hello?”

I took a couple of steps inside. There was a small guard hut just inside the gate, but there was no one in there. It was lit up yellow from an electric lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. I had to change into my uniform anyways, so I grabbed the doorknob. It was brass and loose. The hut looked really old. The outside was all covered in layers and layers of brown paint and you could see where they’d just painted over old cracks and chips in the last coat of paint.

It stank of stale sour bodies, smoke, bad food. The lightbulb buzzed. There was just a desk, a table, all really worn out. Some papers and rubbish on the ground. I didn’t want anyone to see me, and, even though to tell you the truth I was a bit nervous about the whole thing, I turned off the light. Then, as fast as I could, I pulled off my shirt, then my pants.

There were little giggles coming from all over the place.

“Who’s there?”

I scrambled in the dark to get my uniform on and I kept feeling like someone was going to poke me on my bare back in the dark. I was used to getting my uniform on in the dark, so even with the threat of unseen fingers about to jab me, I got it on quick. Then, without even bothering to flip the light switch, I ran out the door, back into the strange air of the factory grounds.

I hadn’t noticed the metallic smell and the tension in the air. Like the air had been pounded and contorted by whatever machines I could hear grinding away out there. There were a few electric lights on lamp posts, but they barely gave off any light here. The ground didn’t seem to be paved. It was sort of muddy dirt. I walked up anyways trying to figure out where I was supposed to go. I almost shouted ‘hello’ again, but something made me stop. There was still no one around. I thought I heard little padded feet jumping in the distance..

It was cloudy now, and the big shapes of the factory buildings loomed over me like big threatening shadows. There weren’t any signs or anything to tell a guy where to go. But I passed pens full of cows. I didn’t get too close. It was almost like a small city in here: roads going this way and that, large wooden warehouses and factory buildings with smoke stacks and pipes and vents with steam coming out.

I turned down one road. There was a little house that just looked like a regular brick house. It was dim because it was only lit up by one dull lightbulb, but there was a little scraggly lawn out front. I went up to the front door, all painted a majestic jet black. I figured maybe the factory was like a church and the foreman lived here the way Father Wheelan lived in his church. I knocked, but no lights came on inside and no one came to the door. So I walked on.

I started to think. Back home on St. Gaff's, there weren't any cows at the milk station, or any big machines except the thermolizer. And there were milk trucks in a parking lot. And here there were cows, but no trucks. Then I realized there wasn't even a sign saying that this was the DOLA experimental lab. Just the words above the gate about all things being pure to the pure. But that was just a saying Mr. Corwin liked to use.

So maybe I'd just stumbled into the wrong place after all. For a split second I felt relieved. Maybe I could just get out of this creepy place, but then I was nervous because I was still supposed to report for duty today and it was already night and I didn't know where I was supposed to be.

The first thing was to find my way back out of here. I turned down a corner. Now that I was trying to get out, everything about this place bothered me more. The weird air that I now realized was suffocating me, the smell of cows and earth and sooty machine smoke. And how dark it was. I picked up the pace.

At the end of the road, though, blocking my way was a huge tower. As I got closer, I could see it was a metal tower with stilts and on top – a massive steel vat – it looked ancient with black grime all over it. But I could make out in big red capital letters: MILK! There was even an exclamation mark to show how exciting it was. And there were tubes poking out of the bottom of the vat, going in all directions. With my eyes, I traced the path of the tubes from the vat all the way down. I hadn't noticed a vast parking lot full of milk trucks. My heart sank as I realized this was the right place after all.

I heard footsteps and grunting far away. I almost shouted 'hello' but then I decided I didn't really want to know what was making the noise.

Despondent and deflated, I walked around the outside of the parking lot. How big is this place anyways? The trucks were the same as the ones back home. The black paint glistened with evening dew under the yellow light bulbs. Then there was another tower. A wooden four-legged tower with a sort of plywood cabin on top. A mass of tangled electric wires led into the cabin and there was a pipe leading straight from the big milk vat into the cabin. There was a red neon sign: "Office," it said. But there wasn't an exclamation mark. I hadn't seen many neon lights before and I was always dazzled when I did see one.

The grunting got closer and I figured I'd better just get to the office and get inside and behind a door. There was a rickety looking ladder leading up to the office. It was the only way to get there. Was the grunting coming from in the cabin? They were probably closed for the day anyways and I didn't want to walk in on something I shouldn't have. I went up a couple of rungs, but the air seemed so thin up here and the ladder wasn't too stable.

I heard another weird noise from inside the office. Then the cabin and the ladder shook like something hit the wall, and I decided that it would probably be better if I came back tomorrow since they were probably closed here for the night. I went down the few rungs to the ground. Now which way was the gate? It was back behind the milk vat so I started back that way. But then, there was the grunting again.

I turned and a cow was running right at me! It had some kind of harness on and a big leather thing covering its eyes. And all in a moment I saw three milkmen chasing the cow.

"Hey there! Stop it!"

I wasn't one to shy away from a fight, so when the cow got close, I grabbed part of the harness on the side. It just about took me off the ground but I pulled as hard as I could for a few steps before I had to let go and fell to the ground. But the cow changed direction because of the pulling and slammed face first into the side of a building. Then it just stood there dazed. The other milkmen caught up.

"Thanks mate. Don't know how she got away."

"No problem."

They got the cow calmed down. Or maybe she was just stunned. But the other two pulled her around and led her away.

"Got a minute? Why don't you help us get this beastie inside."

"Oh, my shift's over, I'm just heading home."

"Your shift?" He looked me up and down.

"You sure you're in the right place, mate? You work here?"

I didn't want to arouse any suspicions or get into any complicated conversations.

"Sure...well, I just got transferred here. It's my first day."

"His first day!" The big one said, chucking.

"We've got a treat in store for you then, come on!"

I decided I had to go along. So all four of us walked the cow along.

"Why does it take four milkmen to handle one cow?"

"S'not really the walking that's the problem mate."

We turned down a lane and walked the cow through a big open door into a big dim warehouse type room with big machines like radios all around.

"So where'd you transfer from?"

"County Buckle."

"Buckle...you ain't seen nothing like this in Buckle."

I helped them walk the cow onto a sort of big metal sheet on the ground. Then the others started attaching wires to different parts of the cow.

"Is this some kind of medical procedure? Is the cow sick?"

The big one chuckled again.

"Oh, she's in perfect health."

The one who kept calling me mate attached a wire to a hook on the leather thing covering the cow's eyes. She got nervous and shook a bit, but I pet her head to keep her calm.

"Ready? Stand back."

"Get off the metal, mate."

I stepped off and watched as the big one threw a big switch on one of the machines, which turned out not to be a radio at all. There was a loud buzz and the cow started to shake and smoke. The machine made loud clicking noises. It stank. A mix of animal cooking and burning electricity. One of the most awful things I'd ever seen. The animal collapsed

"Bet you never saw an Ohm cooker before."

"No..."

The other milkman got a knife and sliced into the dead cow.

"Hey Buckle - you want some steaks?"

I ran outside and threw up. I heard the others laughing inside. My mate came out.

"You alright there, mate?"

"Why did you do that?"

"Boss says we have to find a process to kill the cow and cook it at the same time. The meat'll be inferior to what you get at the butcher, but it'll be suitable for tin cans. Last forever. It'll be a miracle of science if it works out."

I got up.

"You weren't here during the day?"

I shook my head.

"You ain't seen nothin yet, boyo."

"Which way's the gate?"

He pointed and I left without saying anything else.

So that's the kind of experiment they wanted me to do? I didn't see why they went to all the trouble to send me here for this. I signed up to be a milkman. To deliver milk and keep an eye on the civilians. There was nothing in the contract about slaughtering cows...it just didn't seem right. When I got close to the gate, the pounding started again. What was that?

I thought I'd feel a lot better if I got out of this place and talked things over with Stormy. She'd know what to do. But there, just beyond the gate, were three coppers snooping around. They pushed a button I hadn't seen and it made a buzzer go off in the little guard hut. But there was still no one in there. I just

hunched down behind the hut where they wouldn't see me. They buzzed again and I heard them say something about coming back tomorrow. I peeked out from around the corner and saw them walk off. When I was sure they were gone, I crept out and opened the gate. The idiot cops could have just opened it themselves and come in. They didn't even try.

I walked back out into the city. It was darker than before. There were just a few lights on here and there, but now there was nothing. Now, between me and you, this was the first time I'd had any shadows of any doubts about the milkmen. Up until now, I felt like they really had my back at every turn. We were a band of brothers. But something in me felt a bit betrayed at being transferred to this gloomy place where I couldn't drive on the coast road in the early morning and where they electrocuted cows in the middle of the night. But I followed the row of electric poles back towards the coffee shop and my love Stormy. It was getting foggier and I remembered a song she once sang to me while I was falling asleep at her house:

For it's cold out there, but I don't dare

To stay inside with you,

But you wrapped me up in your great arms

To Keep me from the foggy foggy dew

I hurried up my pace. It was getting colder. Then my stomach sank. The coffee shop was dark. Closed. I walked up to the window. I knew it was futile, but I looked in anyways. And sure enough, the place was totally deserted. Where the hell did Stormy go? I looked all around thinking maybe she was cowering in the shadows somewhere without me. But there wasn't a soul about at all. Calm down, I told myself. If I were her what would I do? She's got no money, she doesn't know anyone, it's night and she's never been in a big city. And we're in a weird neighbourhood on the outskirts. She probably didn't like the police any more than I did, so she probably wouldn't go to them. My heart started pounding. The woman I loved had fled into the rusty pipes and oily puddles of this blighted place and I couldn't protect her.

The only thing she could have done was go to where she thought I was. Back to the experimental labs. But she must've gotten lost since I didn't see her on my way back. I went back the way I'd come. I thought about yelling out her name, but didn't want to because of the people who must've been sleeping in the occasional house or apartment building around here.

The idea of having to come to this weird place every day was really bothering me. I got to thinking about the fact that we'd probably have to live out here since we didn't have a car and I didn't see any streetcar tracks around. What the heck would we eat? I wasn't going back to bread and molasses after Granard's fish sandwiches. I was homesick. Poking around dark alleys and corners. I'd always had this dream of becoming a big deal, leading an adventurous life. I couldn't wait to get off that backwater island and conquer the world. But now it seemed like maybe just staying a milkman on St. Gaff's would have been a better and satisfying life. Especially now that I turned the corner and nearly bumped into the bobbies. Apparently they'd stayed in the area. They turned around and just stared at me. Were they looking for me? Or just doing a foot patrol?

“Howie Coxwell?”

They were looking for me. So I ran. And they chased me. I wouldn't have had much trouble getting away from them, since I was young and strong and they were more hefty. But the three of them split up. I thought I'd head down a little alley they might not notice and seconds later, a bobby tackled me to the ground, shouting. But I struggled away and ran off...Running around in this maze was silly. I ran into the blackness between two buildings, and got down in the wet weeds and just tried to control my breathing. Across the road from me, there was a lightbulb that was hanging over a doorway on the side of a cinderblock building. Beside it was a chair, just sitting there beside the door. I didn't have anything else to do so I just lay there and looked at the chair. I imagined some guy took his breaks there and had been sitting in the same old chair in the same old fog smoking a cigarette for years and years. And maybe 30 years from now, some other juvenile delinquent would be running from the police and he'd see me there, fat and smoking and trying to convince himself he hadn't wasted his life.

I didn't want that to be me. I was getting concerned about whether I'd made the right choice about being transferred here. Well, Howie, you kept pushing for the big promotion and finally they gave it to you. You've got no one to blame but yourself. I think I fell asleep for a while and dreamed about home, But I woke up when the three cops walked by. They didn't see me. They must've given up since they were just walking off like they were going home. When I couldn't hear them anymore, I got up and tried to get my bearings. Nothing looked too familiar, but I thought I recognized one of the smokestacks up –

“GOT HIM!”

And I was running full tilt from the cops who'd been hiding in wait for me.

“Give it up, son!”

I followed the rabbit around a corner. I didn't even remember that I was following him. He led me this way and that around corners. He got way ahead of me and turned around to eyeball me with that bulbous dangling eye of his. I thought he'd be my saviour. But he led me down a muddy track. My boots started sucking in the muck till one boot got really stuck and I fell face first into the blackest water I'd ever seen. It was oily and I couldn't figure out which way was up and I couldn't tell how deep it was. I held my breath, but right in front of my face there was a cow muzzle. I thrashed to get away and my hands hit slippery tendony bones. The cow's face got closer and its eyes lolled open. I gasped a bit and saw which way the bubbles went. I only probably had a few seconds left and my lungs were bursting. I grabbed the big slippery bone on my left and pushed myself the way the bubbles were going.

But it was all cow bones and shredded rotten hides all the way up. I pulled and pushed my way through as the red eyes awoke. They knew me. The muzzled me. I could feel the tongues, like old rotten cheese licking the back of my neck. But I grabbed at the shore and pulled myself up onto the shore. I couldn't tell if this was a spell or not. But I scrambled up to get away from the water and there in front of me, huge frowning and mangy, the rabbit but at least three feet tall. I thought he was there to help me, but he hopped up and kicked me with his front legs and I almost fell back into the water. It lunged again but I grabbed it and we wrestled in the mud and trash that was lying around. It kicked and kicked but I flipped it over and stuffed its face in the mud and pushed it down as hard as I could. The image kept flashing in my head: my mom sitting there not caring that I'd come home. And I pushed the thing's head harder and

harder into the mud, trying to extinguish the thing that kept ruining my life. I felt my eyes bulging with the strain. Until the rabbit went limp. I rolled it into the stinking water and stood up on the banks of the river...I was close to the experimental labs. The horizon was red with the impending sunrise. I was, once again cold and shivering and alone and way too exposed to the sky. I looked at one moon and then the other and wondered why they'd forsaken me and left me to this strange existence. And I was soaking wet.

But it wasn't just water. There was a weird smelling greasy film all over me. I looked down into the black waters of the River Kierston and understood: it was the experimental labs that made the water black. The bottom was a thick layer of slowly rotting cow corpses. The oily stuff in the water kept the light and air out and stopped the cows decomposing in a proper natural way. I heard a couple of distant truck motors. Some screech of metal from somewhere.

I clambered up the bank and onto the road. I tried to get my bearings. I didn't like this place. And I couldn't understand it. Factories and warehouses and the streets weren't on a grid, but seemed to jut out and crisscross each other at weird angles. But there were houses here and there and occasional shops but it wasn't too crowded. How could someone end up living out here? I just sat there for a bit trying to clear my head as the sky above me got lighter.

But as the sun poked its curious head over the horizon, there was more movement around. People shuffling about. One truck, then another trundled along. Milk trucks. The sun's arrival warmed me a bit. I'd survived the night. But men were emerging from houses and walking along the roads. No one said anything and I could tell they didn't want to notice the bedraggled milkman with mud all over his legs.

A factory whistle blew not too far away and I supposed it was time to start work for some. Then I remembered: Stormy was out here somewhere, too. Maybe the police had gotten her? I'd ask the milkmen to help me find her. Probably she'd just ended up walking all around looking for me, but now that the sun was up and people were walking around, she'd find her way to the Labs. I found myself drifting with the crowd until it thinned out, turning down different avenues or disappearing into huge belching buildings. No other milkmen were about.

Up ahead I saw, once again, the gate of the labs. And there were milkmen, I could tell from the white uniforms, dragging three dark shapes inside past the guard hut. When I got there, I looked again at the perplexing words that were written over the gate: Unto the Pure, All Things are Pure. I pushed the gate, but it was locked and a burly milkman popped out of the hut.

"No one gets in here without authorization."

"But I'm a milkman"

"And a sodden one at that," he said.

"I fell in the river."

"Not surprised. By the smell of you."

"I need to report to the boss right away. I was supposed to be here yesterday but I got..lost."

"See the boss? And what might your name be? I'll have to check the register."

“Howie Coxwell,”

“Howie Coxwell. I see. Well you’re not going to see the boss like that.”

He opened the gate and let me in.

“You see that building there? The low brick one? That’s the quartermaster. You go wait there for the officer to come by and tell him you need a fresh uniform since you’ve got an appointment at the office.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Now the office –”

“I know, just beyond the big milk vat.”

He looked at me sort of sideways when I said that, but I just walked off. I couldn’t wait to put on a dry warm new uniform. I walked past the place where they’d shocked the cow. The milkman was there still and smiled oddly at me as I walked past.

“Hey, mate.”

I didn’t say anything.

The door to the quartermaster’s building was locked. I stood there waiting and waiting and I got bored and started wondering about the digging sounds. So I walked around the back of the building and there was a hunched over old man in a uniform digging a hole. It looked like he was having quite a hard time of it, too. There were three body bags piled up against the wall. He looked up when he noticed me and winked:

“Three more for the ditch, eh? Found them on the perimeter. Boss says they ain’t real cops and shouldn’t a been snooping around here even if they was. We don’t want more of their kind coming round.”

“Three cops?” Goddammit, I thought.

“Yes. Took quite a beating, they did. How’s about helpin’ an old fella out with some digging?”

“Sorry, I have to report to the office right away.”

I went back around front, but I noticed the old guy poking his head around. I think he was pretty annoyed that I didn’t want to help out, but orders are orders.

Three dead cops. Great. I hadn’t been in the city for hardly 24 hours, and already I was going to get blamed for something. I wondered who found them and decided they had to be buried right away. Probably best if I stayed as far away as I could from the whole situation. Anyways, the quartermaster wasn’t showing up, and I figured that if I just kept standing here doing nothing, the old guy would insist that I help him. My uniform was starting to dry out a bit. I brushed as much of the mud off as I could and left for the office.

There were more milkmen around now. I saw two with gold tassels on their uniforms walk past me. I caught a snippet of their conversation.

“If he gets enough of the stuff, yeah, it’s gonna be a kind of gas that’ll just kill the enemy right in the trenches.”

“They tried it with that thermolizer but it didn’t work. Couldn’t get enough.”

I’d had just about enough of this stinking place with its electrocuted cows and black smoke and cadavers buried all over the place. I thought back about my first golden days as a milkman, with Mr. Corwin giving speeches, and Frank and Beaver laughing it up and all the bluster from Mr. Billings, and that peckerhead McMyrtle screwing everything up and my quiet drives to the radio station. That was the kind of milkman I wanted to be. I picked up my pace and lifted up my head.

I was going to march into that office and tell the boss I wanted to go back to St. Gaff’s to deliver milk like a normal milkman. I was willing to bet Stormy had had enough of this place too and I bet she missed her big nice house. Beyond the milk vat was the ladder I hadn’t been able to climb last night. But now, I was determined to go in, no matter what noises I heard.

It was actually perfectly quiet. I got to the top where there was a little platform in front of the door. I took the opportunity to take in the view: a hellscape of ugly factories, smoke, random rundown houses. The black river cutting it down the middle. Up here I could see that it was a sort of swampy area, which is probably why they didn’t bother to build anything nice here until the factories came. Maybe this place hadn’t even existed when I was a kid. There were also lots of train tracks I hadn’t noticed and a lot of them looked like they came right into the experimental labs. The sun was up now, a sickly pale egg yolk in a washed out, pukey sky. It might have been 7 or 8 in the morning,

I knocked on the door and heard laughing from inside. I knocked again harder.

“Come in!”

It took me a while to figure out what I was looking at. It was all a bit too much. Stormy was sitting on a red velvet couch with a tall glass of milk and she was smiling. But before I could say anything I looked from her to the man behind the desk, also smiling. A smile I’d seen before, along with a pair of gold rimmed spectacles I’d seen before. Stan. I was trembling.

“Stormy - how did you –”

“Howie! They closed the coffee shop just after you left, but Stan found me.”

“I’m glad you finally found us, Mr. Coxwell.”

“You...We...”

“No need to worry about your tardiness. The campus can be a bit confusing for newcomers.”

“But I saw you –”

“Perhaps we’ve crossed paths somewhere before, but we’ve got to get on with business. Milk?”

He took a large frosty looking glass out from behind his desk and walked over to a spigot in the wall. He walked strangely, like he'd broken one of his legs a long time ago and it hadn't healed up quite right. He poured me a glass and I took it. I had a sip. It was good. Maybe the best I'd ever had.

"I gather your mother's been speaking with some of our yellow newspapermen here in town. And with law enforcement."

"My mother..."

"Yes. We'll see to it that things don't get out of hand."

For some reason, what he said, and the way he said it, made me really uncomfortable.

"What is it, Howie? Speak your mind."

"I want to go back to St. Gaff's."

"Oh, that's out of the question. We need you here."

"Then I don't want to be a milkman —"

"Howie!" Stormy said. "This is a good opportunity. They're going to give us a house! For free!"

"Your ladyfriend is right. It's a modest dwelling. A row house. But fully furnished. In light of your legal troubles, I've decided that you'll have a regular milk route. No use trying to hide. I want you as visible and ordinary as possible. We'll handle the trial, if there is one, when the time comes.

As he was talking, I took in the office. There were blueprints and train schedules stapled to the walls. There were a bunch of draftsmen's pencils all over the desk. And the desk was just an ordinary desk and the place looked just about the same as the foreman's office at the shipyard back home. Except for the big red couch.

"Once a week, Fridays after your shift, you'll report here to me for the weekend."

I looked at Stormy.

"And leave Stormy alone all weekend?"

"I'll be fine, Howie. This is a good opportunity."

"You don't have to worry about Stormy, my boy. I've got my eye on her."

And he winked at me.

33. Birthday!

“Peckerhead would be the best way to describe the guy. But no, I didn’t have anything personal against Mr. Billings. He was just doing his job, I suppose.”

“And yet, he was found dead the next day. And no one was ever charged?”

“I don’t think anyone was charged. I’m pretty sure they just concluded that it was a wild animal. We did have all those wolves a few months later, you know. Did you know about those?”

“No.”

“A bunch of wolves started attacking everyone in town. We went into the woods, where it was all dark on the edge of town and flushed them out with guns and brooms.”

“I see.”

And then a flash of genius crossed my mind.

“You know, that’s probably what happened to your old teacher, Professor Florsham. I bet he wandered out of town and the wolves got him.”

I was pretty pleased with myself for this explanation, but Professor Lamy looked really aghast.

You’re probably wondering why professor Lamy was riding along with me in the milk truck today. First of all, it wasn’t a real milk truck like on St. Gaff’s, but a smaller vehicle that would fit down the narrow lanes you find all over Mingsbight.

“Listen, professor. If you want to know what it’s really like, why don’t you take 4 bottles and go drop them off at the next stop. Just knock and when the lady of the house opens up, just give her a pleasant hello and drop the bottles inside the door.”

“I’m really not here for...”

“Oh, I see. Afraid to get your hands dirty like a working man?”

“Oh, all right.”

So I sat there and watched him get the bottles out of the back. I just eased into the seat and took it easy while the old guy did my work for me. I looked over and he was having some sort of chat with the woman. He was really getting into it.

“Hey, professor, you forgot the empties.”

“Empties?”

“She left the empty bottles there on the step.”

“Oh.”

So he went back to get them. For a brilliant professor, he sure didn't catch on quick. But I forgot. I was going to tell you why he was riding along with me. It's a bit of a long story, and I'll have to go back a couple of weeks to that conversation with Stan. Now, a lot of people are scared of Stan, and there are all kinds of rumors about him. He seemed to be in a lot of places at once. But to me, he just seemed like an industrious guy. And pretty down to earth, too. With me at least. I mean, he insisted that I call him Stan instead of Mr. ...I don't even know his last name, come to think of it. But anyways, he really treated me with respect and he knew how to get the best out of his employees. So if you remember, I was talking with him and Stormy was there on the red couch. But then when it was time to get down to business, Stan rang a bell and someone came in a moment later.

“Bill, will you take Miss Stormy here for a tour? Just the milk. Not the packing plant”

“Will do, boss.”

So the two of them left.

“It seemed an obvious choice to combine the milk processing with meat packing. We have trains coming in from all over Tow Law full of cattle. And, as you know, this is also our primary research facility.”

“Wow.”

“Wow, indeed.”

Now, Howie, I know you've been working with Mr. Corwin on St. Gaff's. I'm a different sort of manager. Mr. Corwin thought it best, because of your youth and inexperience, to keep you in the dark about what we're really doing here. I don't believe he ever explained what the thermolizer was or why it was on St. Gaff's.”

“No, he didn't”

“I thought so.”

“My philosophy, Howie, is that you'll get the best out of your people if they know what it is they're working for. If they have a clear goal in mind and feel like they're part of something important.”

“That makes a lot of sense, Mr...Stan?”

“Stan is fine. Think of it this way. If you have a milk truck, and you load it up with bottles of milk, fill the gas tank, start the engine but then discover that there's no steering wheel. How many customers are going to get their milk that morning?”

“Geez. None!”

“None. Right. It is my firm conviction that the St. Gaff's project failed primarily because you were not apprised of the goal. You had no compass to guide you and you never felt like you had any stake in the outcome.”

“So what was the thermolizer for? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Not at all, my boy. I admire your curiosity. Scientists have known for some time that phlogesterion has certain qualities. Qualities that would be very useful given the proper application. About 18 months ago, quite by accident, one of our senior members, Mr. Walker, in fact, discovered a sinkhole on the island of St. Gaff’s. He knew we were on the lookout for a source of phlogesterion, so we gave him permission to explore. And, as luck would have it, he came across exactly what we were looking for. A colony of underground cattle ruled by the creature you know as Mamifa. Finally, we’d found a source of red phlogesterion. And so, we sent Mr. Corwin along with his assistants and the machine the engineers over at the university had built for us. It proved very difficult to gather enough of the liquid. So our first thought was to breed some of the regular cows on the island with the help of the red substance. But the results were...disappointing. Then, we attempted to simply gather the liquid directly, despite the risks. This is where, by an amazing stroke of good luck, we discovered that you have a certain affinity for the creatures. Mr. Corwin was under tremendous pressure to get the thermolizer working and, I believe, he applied that pressure to you. But you also had little success. I don’t blame you or Mr Corwin. It was a difficult project, and he also, as I understand it, had a problem with local subversives. And keeping subversion under control is of course one of our primary mandates.

“In any case, we were just about to close the project down when the incident happened on the island. We gathered as much information as we could and decided to shift the project from red phlogesterion to green. As you may or may not know, phlogesterion comes only in red and green varieties. Functionally, they should both be adequate for our needs, if we can find them in sufficient quantities. And that’s where you come in. We’re going to need you for our research into procuring a steady source of green phlogesterion.”

“But you didn’t tell me what the thermolizer actually does. Or did.”

He looked at me with a piercing look.

“You’re a sharp one, Howie. I’m really patting myself on the back for bringing you in. This war. It’s been dragging on for years, as you know. It’s taken a terrible toll on our nation. And without the metal that we need for our industries, we won’t be able to continue the fight much longer. Our ungrateful former colony to the north refuses to listen to reason and relinquish control of her mountain mines. I’ve been to the front lines, Howie. The men in the trenches, the machine guns, the barbed wire. The carnage. A nightmare. You’d do anything to help with the war effort, wouldn’t you, Howie?”

“Of course!”

“That’s what my man told me. He spoke with you just after you lost your finger. ‘Stan’, he said, ‘he’s one of us. You can rely on Howie Coxwell to do the right thing.’

“Well, what if I were to tell you that with the right vaporization technology, and enough phlogesterion, we could subdue the enemy very quickly right in their trenches. We wouldn’t have to use bombs or fire or bullets. Just a gaseous form of phlogesterion that would cause the enemy to cease its activities at once in a more humane fashion with minimal carnage. That would be nothing short of a miracle, wouldn’t it, Howie?”

“Yes, it would.”

“That was precisely the aim of the electric thermolizer. And it’s a real pity that it failed. But now we have a chance to make it right. Working together, I’m confident that we can achieve this. If you succeed, Howie, you’ll be a national hero and you will go down in the annals of scientific history. Immortalized.”

I was flabbergasted and didn’t really know what to say.

“Geez.”

“Geez indeed, Howie. Now you can understand, I’m sure, why Mr. Corwin didn’t want to explain all of this. In the wrong hands, this information could be devastating. If the enemy were to get a hold of you...if they developed the same technology, it would be a catastrophe.”

“Yes, it would.”

“And you can see why *you* mustn’t ever speak with anyone outside the department about this. Including Stormy.”

“Of course, sir. You can count on me. I know how to keep a secret.”

“I’m sure that you do, my boy.”

He went on to explain that the Department of Lactic Affairs had partnered with the university of Mingsbight and that I’d be working with their guy on the project. You guessed it, Professor Lamy.

But Stan also said they didn’t want to rush in right away. We had to do this right, and sadly, there was a lot of attention on me from the authorities. So the first week, I was just supposed to get settled and get a handle on my new route. Then I was supposed to report back to the labs Friday after work. But I was allowed to take the rest of the day off. So Stormy came back to the office and Stan got Bill to drive us to our new house in a big black Department car.

“So did you see all the milk stuff? That giant vat?”

“Yeah, it was interesting.”

“Stan seems really nice”

“He does! A real gentleman. Did he explain why you have to go all the way out there instead of working at the nice building downtown?”

“Yes, but it’s totally top secret. It’s about the war.”

She didn’t seem too interested.

“Maybe one day we’ll get a car like this.” she said

“Maybe!”

She was a lot more excited about the house. It was just a simple row house, sort of like my mom’s place. It was furnished and we had to open the windows right away because of the stuffiness. And there were a few holes in the walls. It looked like someone got into a fight or something before us. Bill also gave me an advance on my paycheque and for me at least it was a lot of money. So we set to work cleaning the place up. Stormy went shopping for food and she tried to figure out how to fix the holes in the walls.

I went down and reported for duty at the local milk station.

“Listen, Coxwell. I know who you are and what you’re doing here. But as long as you’re working for me, you’ll show up on time. You’ll deliver milk on time. And I don’t want any weird crap going on around my station. Understood?”

That was Mr. Dwyer. These milk station bosses were all the same.

“No need to worry about me, Mr. Dwyer. I know what I’m doing.”

He gave me my route. 500 pints. Not too bad. And not too far from my old neighbourhood. I knew a couple of people on my route and they were pretty shocked to see the big town boy who went away to make good, now back as a professional milkman. I was also surprised that on Tuesday, I saw Granard out collecting trash. It was garbage day. He was dumping cans into the back of the garbage truck.

“Hey Granard!”

His face went dark when he saw me.

“Mr. Granard, what are you doing here?”

“As if you don’t know. Two shops destroyed. The bank took the rest.”

He just walked off following the garbage truck.

It’s the kind of thing that makes you think. One day, a successful business owner, the next, he’s the dustman. The wheel of fortune just keeps spinning around in its funny way and you never know where it’s going to take you. Still, it was nice to see a face from back home. Maybe I’d even invite him to my birthday party. It was coming up pretty soon. Next Friday, actually, and I was betting Stormy had some surprises in the works. But this Friday, after my rounds, I had to go off to the experimental labs. Bill told me that I could actually take the tube most of the way. They’d built some new stations out that direction since I’d been gone, I suppose.

On the train, I kept looking around at everyone. Middle aged guys and women on their way here and there. Thinking their own thoughts without a care in the world about their fellow man. And not one of them had any idea about the seriousness of what this lone milkman was up to. Hurtling through the tunnel on a mission to save the nation.

At the experimental lab, a man in a suit met me inside the gate. He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

“Mr. Jeffries. In-house counsel for the Department. Right this way, please, Mr. Coxwell”

That seemed a bit odd. But he escorted me to a little building not far from the quartermaster’s hut and the three mounds of earth. He showed me into a little office where a smiling, kindly doctor in white was waiting.

“I’m Doctor Pilkington. We’re just going to be doing a few tests today, nothing to worry about.”

I was pretty nervous. I’d been wondering all week when the other shoe was going to drop. Stan spoke nicely about all the things we were going to do. But then he never actually mentioned what I was going to be doing to find the phlogesterion. And now I was here in this white tiled room with a lot of shining steel instruments. Some looked familiar from Dr. Barrett’s place, but some I didn’t recognize at all.

First, the doctor shone a flashlight in my eyes, then he looked in my ear. He hit my knee with a hammer. This wasn’t so bad. But then he took out a big syringe and a number of little bottles. I started to sweat. The lawyer was writing notes and smiling, but he didn’t say anything. The doctor drew a bunch of blood. I’d never had a needle before, and even though it didn’t really bother me, I felt a bit faint when I stood up.

“Oh oh, just have a seat there, son. Hold on. And he produced, from one of the drawers, a sucker.”

While I sucked it, the doctor looked over at the lawyer .

“So far so good?” The doctor asked.

“Mmm hmm.”

They did a few more normal seeming tests and I was on my way and feeling pretty good. That wasn’t so bad at all!

The weekend was my first taste of urban domestic bliss. Stormy wanted to get some new glasses for the house, so we walked downtown and poked around the shops. We got fish sandwiches at one of the big department stores downtown. I felt pretty old and responsible watching the shop girl wrap the new glasses up in paper and handing them to me. This, I thought to myself, is what life is all about. Stormy seemed calmer than she’d been for a long time, which was a relief. Then, Monday morning bright and early, I showed up for work and Professor Lamy was there just like Stan said he’d be.

“Professor! Have any good steaks lately?”

“Oh yes, Stu’s back on the island. Those were good, weren’t they?”

“They sure were. You okay, professor?”

He was yawning every five seconds. I guess he wasn’t used to getting up at 4 or whenever he had to get up to make it over here on time. He hopped into the milk truck and off we went. The first couple of days, he asked me a few questions, but nothing too pointed. He explained that he did research on phrenology and psychology, which is the study of the soul, but now no one believes in the soul really, so it’s just about figuring out the brain. In particular, he wanted to understand my brain. As the week went on, though, he started getting more pointed with his questions. Then, on Friday, he was asking me about

Billings, like I said before. And Friday, like I also said before, was my birthday. I'd dropped a few hints and couldn't wait to see what was waiting for me at home. But when we got to talking about Professor Lamy's old mentor, Professor Florsham, things started getting pretty uncomfortable.

"But...forgive me...but getting back to professor Florsham. You mentioned that he might have wandered off and run into some wolves..."

"Hold on, Professor."

I went and delivered some milk, wondering what he was getting at.

"Again, back to professor Florsham, and I don't mean to contradict, you, Howie, but I did actually have a chance to speak with Mr. Corwin and Mr. Frank. Oh, just Frank, I see...well, they mentioned something about you suspecting he was a subversive and. Well. They did mention that you gave him a certain concoction."

"Oh haha, sorry professor. I didn't know they'd told you. We milkmen have certain secrets we can't tell any non-milkmen."

"I see, well, yes, I have been fully briefed on everything, so feel free to tell me the truth. This is about scientific inquiry, not moral judgment. The success of the project relies on me getting a clear picture of your psyche."

"Right. Well, it sounds like you already know everything there is to know."

"Not everything, Howie. For instance, can you tell me how you felt just before administering the liquid? Before...well, before you killed him?"

"I didn't kill him!"

"No?"

"No. I sort of tripped and Frank and Beaver had to help."

"I see. So you don't think you killed him?"

"No."

"But you were about to."

"Yes, I think so. Mr. Corwin told me to."

"And again, how did it feel just before?"

"Hmm...let me think...I was...scared?"

"Did it feel at all the way you feel when you have your spells?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Why would you ask me something like that?"

“Okay, perhaps that’s enough for today.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

And I went to deliver a few more bottles. We were getting behind on the schedule. I sat back down beside the guy.

“So Really. Why do you want to know this stuff?”

“Stan told me to be frank with you, Howie, so I’ll be frank. Your mind is unique. You must have noticed that you don’t think the same way others do.”

“It’s true, professor. I always felt like I was different. Separate.”

“Exactly. I have a theory I’d like to explore. That there may be some connection between your...normative orientation, let’s say...and your other abilities.”

“That makes a lot of sense, Professor.”

“I’m glad, Howie. Afterall, you know the old myths about the origins of the red and green essences. The old Manichean belief that the universe was created through a battle between good and evil and the earth is some sort of imperfect outcropping that emerged through this strife. The red essence was pure evil and the green pure goodness...of course, no one believes that any more. But there’s still a lot we don’t know about phlogisterion. We know, for example, that the universe has a certain mass, but we can’t account for all of it. Some believe there’s a parallel realm. The source of the phlogesterion. That accounts for that extra mass.”

“Right. That’s what I was thinking, too.”

We were just about done for the day anyways and he turned to me.

“Listen, Howie. I forgot to mention. I’d like you to come out for a dinner with me tonight. A number of professors will be there. I think you’ll find it quite interesting. And bring Stormy as well.”

“Oh, I’d love to, but I can’t - you see, I have dinner plans with Stormy.”

“You know you’re required to show up to the labs on Fridays after work.”

“I thought it wouldn’t take that long and I’d be home in time for...”

“I’m afraid not, Howie. I’ve asked Stan for an exemption for tonight. I’ll give you the address. And - how about wearing your uniform? 8 o’clock would be perfect.”

“Okay, fine. I guess we’ll have the little party first. Listen. Can you just hang on a minute? I have to go do something.”

“All right, Howie.”

We were on the way back to the station, and I pulled over and parked the vehicle. We were just a couple of blocks from my mother's house and I wanted to pop in. It was my birthday, after all. We'd had our differences, but I'm sure she didn't want to miss seeing her boy on his 19th birthday.

I walked over. The street was quiet. I knocked, but then noticed the door was already open a crack. So I walked in.

"Mom?"

There was no answer. The back window was open and the curtain was blowing in the breeze. It was cool in the house and there was a weird empty feeling. It didn't stink like smoke as much as it used to.

"Mom?"

I went upstairs. The bed wasn't made. I started to get nervous. I went back down. I looked in the fridge. Almost empty. There wasn't much in the cupboards. Was she gone? I just sat down at the table where I used to sit every morning for breakfast. There was a calendar on the wall with a sickly sweet picture of a mill and a creek. It was on the wrong page. A few months off. I remembered my last birthday, sitting right here. It didn't go well, and I noticed. When I was just a kid I don't think my birthdays went well either, but I don't think I noticed. But now I was a man. And everything looked different.

Maybe my mom got paid by someone for what she said about me and now she's moved away. Or maybe something terrible happened to her. Maybe she moved away because she couldn't bear to face the fact that she got me in trouble with the law again and now I'd be in a trial. Maybe the milkmen got her so there wouldn't be a trial? I was just staring at the calendar. Maybe my mom didn't need to know the date anymore?

It was weird being here alone. I don't remember ever having the whole house to myself. It occurred to me that I could stand up and spin around and yell and do anything I wanted now that they were gone. But I didn't. I just sat there. That mill and that creek really bothered me. I got up and tore the calendar off the wall. It made a thin stupid sound and I thought I was being childish to do something like that.

I punched a hole in the wall.

It hurt like hell but I refused to yelp. I thought I might sink into a spell but the ground here was as firm and hard and real as any ground I'd ever stood on. But something really was bubbling up inside. And then, just like that, my mother walked in the door with a paper bag of groceries.

"Howie. You scared me nearly to death."

"You accused me to the police?"

"Oh Howie, they pushed me into it. Those newspaper men..."

"You think I did it?"

All of a sudden an old familiar feeling came over me. But the ground stayed still.

“I didn’t know. If you’d been here we could have talked about it, but you just disappeared. What was I supposed to think? Oh my God! What happened to the wall!?!”

I just walked out the door. There was nothing going through my mind at all. I went back to professor Lamy who now was standing on the sidewalk looking at his pocketwatch impatiently, but I really didn’t give a fuck.

“Howie. Where have you been?”

I hopped in the milk truck.

“I was just telling my mom it’s my birthday.”

“Your birthday? Oh, I didn’t know.”

We drove back to the station, not saying a word. So that night we got dressed up. Or Stormy did anyways, and made our way to Winterville, the neighbourhood where the university of Mingsbight was and where this professor lived. Professor Manstone. Anyways, Stormy and I ended up getting into a terrible fight at the party. I don’t really feel like talking about it right now. Maybe another time.

I just walked out of Professor Manstone's house, not knowing where I was going. This was supposed to be my goddamned birthday. Stormy hadn’t said a word. I should have been surrounded by friends and family and everyone was supposed to be nice to me. At least for this one day. Instead I had assholes making fun of me to my face, thinking I didn’t notice. My girlfriend telling me I was the one who wasn’t making sense. I felt like it was time for me to assert myself. This was my day and now it was time for me to be in charge of my own life. I decided to march right into the first pub I saw – the Grafton Street Pub – even though this wasn’t even Grafton street. I sat down at the bar. It was a father’s duty to buy his son his first beer on his birthday. But my goddamned father wasn’t even here. So I had to be my own dad and buy myself my own goddamned first beer.

“Stout?”

“What?”

“You want a stout?”

“Bring me a beer!”

And just like that, the bartender filled a glass with brown liquid and demanded that I pay him. I took a sip. Bubbles...bitter...I liked it. I didn’t feel drunk yet. But it was a big glass. A guy was sitting next to me with long hair and he was hunched over like he’d been carrying boulders around all day.

“I can see you’re having a rough day, boy. You got those wild eyes. The fire a youth...I tell ya, I been in the can five years and just got out 6 weeks past. And I tell ya, life ain’t much different than the clink. First you can’t believe you’re in there...then ya just find some way to get through without too much trouble until it’s time to goand that’s just about all there is to it...that and lookin’ over the ladies...am I right?”

And he bumped his nearly empty glass against my shoulder and smiled. A woman did just walk by, but it turned out that she was the singer and guitar player for the bar. Dark hair like Stormy's, she walked up on the stage and got her guitar ready.

"Somethin ain't she?"

And then she sang a song. My birthday song.

"Nother beer?"

"Sure"

Something about the song really got to me. It's like the singer was singing right to me.

As I drank I fell into that singer's eyes and swirled into a haze of memories and hopes and I swayed by myself like the whole bar was swaying with me.

Then there was some sort of argument with the bartender and I was out trying to focus on the sidewalk...the song kept going and I think it was me singing it...did I say that out loud? Did I say *that* out loud? And now they're looking at me...

Somehow in the haze I thought if I just walked along a big street long enough, I'd find a tube station and figure out how to get back to tootingham station.

I think I walked a long time - it was exhausting

I was wrapped up in some thoughts I couldn't really pinpoint mumbling away - and I didn't notice that I wasn't on a big street again...then there was a cemetery on the side - then it was a different neighbourhood and I still didn't know where I was going...and I thought I was working now and earning a paycheque - I could always take a cab back...until I felt in my milkman's pockets - and there was no money there...and then the ground beneath me got a bit more steady - and I remembered - the bartender was mad because I couldn't pay for pint number 4 and I was shouting about the milkmen and how I was going to win the war all by myself and I was escorted out...As soon as I remembered I tried to forget...

And luckily - by a one in a million chance, I saw a familiar face to take my mind off things. It was old scar the pirate - but somehow all grown up and wearing slick street clothes without a pirate hat or anything...

“Hey!”

“You lookin?”

“I’m looking at you - Scar - you don’t remember me?”

“No - you lookin or what?””

“It’s Howie - you’re with the pirate kids of Jeddore!”

“Oh, right” but he didn’t seem to care much.

“Listen, you want some or not?”

“Some what?”

“Tuinol - “

“What’s that?”

He looked strangely at me, I think -

“Pick me up” and he dug into a bag and took out a little bag of little pills - black and blue capsules...

Then out of the blue it struck me - how the heck was Stormy going to get home?

I left Scar there and tried to retrace my steps...

But I didn't know where the heck I was going and ended up on the banks of the broad majestic Kierston...and somehow I got up in the current of my thoughts and forgot where I was supposed to go...and I passed by the headlights and laughing of the rich restaurants down by the waterfront = after gong by the cackling drunks in the alley and ended up somehow on the spit that jutted out into the harbour -

And in the back of my mind I told myself this was the right way even though I knew it wasn't...

And I walked all the way out that spit until there weren't any people there at all...and the few birds weren't making much noise and there was just the waves - and there was the lighthouse out there at the end of the spit...and I remembered when I was 12.

the time I had my friend James when our parents didn't know anything about it, we walked all the way out here on our own, pouring out our 12 year old hopes and fears to each other and then trying to break into the light house - and running like hell when the alarm went off and hiding in the bushes thinking the cops were going to be there any moment and worrying what our parents would do to us...

And I could tell already that I wasn't going to make it back - I'd have to sleep out here on the rubble they used to make the spit and in the bushes...and I knew I'd be cold...but there was that lighthouse I'd only seen in the day - and it was so lonely in the night...what kind of a fool was I to be out here? What kind of idiot was I to walk all the way out here - what the hell was I looking for -

Then I looked up and out to see...I scanned the horizon - thinking this would be a magical moment - rescued by the sight of the mysterious whales...

but there weren't any of the green flashes I thought I'd see...just a sickening embarrassed feeling...

I really thought somehow things would turn out differently, but they didn't... no falena...Stormy wasn't going to show up and help me...I was just going to pass out like a drunk -

I slumped down against a broken piece of concrete - looking up at the lighthouse and its turning light... turning like my stomach...so this was my birthday out here right now...This was Howie taking control of his own life...the passage from boy to manhood alone and penniless on a heap of cold rubble

the years blinking by one by one, disappearing around the corner like the spinning lighthouse light.

Welcome to episode 34 of The Milkman of St. Gaff's -

I'd like to give a shoutout to some new patrons -

Boglemeister - fly sprayer,

Brian Dooley - DOLA Radio Clerk - excellent work, Brian

Joshua Kovach - Milkman, White Badge

Aileen SK - Fly Sprayer

Autumnla Void - Fly Sprayer

Mikey - milkman white badge -

I'd also like to thank Jon for buying me some coffees

And Layla for buying me coffees at ko-fi.com

You can go to howiemilkman.com to find out how you can support this one man band.

And if you are listening for the first time, this is serialized story, so you should start with episode one.

34. The Keys

The sun was up. I was just waking up and I could hardly see with the light in my eyes and it took me a bit to remember where I was or why I felt so bad. Somehow I thought I'd wake up in my own bed - but I'd passed out at the end of the Mingsbight spit.

The sun warmed the front of me a bit...but I was lying there among the cold broken stones and rubble. I couldn't move. The iron rods sticking out of the stones made funny shapes. I could see my breath.

I was sore and a stone was sticking into my back. But I just couldn't move and my head hurt.

All this rubble came from underground when they made the underground train in the city. They didn't have to dig too deep and I don't think they ever had any problems with creatures. But they didn't know where to put all the dirt and someone suggested they just pile it up out here - it would help break up the waves and protect the city from the big storms they sometimes get here. They mixed in the bits of old buildings they'd knocked down over the years. All the junk the city didn't want ended up out here.

My stomach felt achy and queasy and I imagined the town puking up all this dirt that I was lying on. A breeze was picking up and the water looked cold but somehow inviting.

I thought of maybe swimming out and never coming back. Just seeing what great fish might swallow me up or what dolphin might carry me across the sea to the other side.

I'd start a new life as a spice trader in the far off deserts and no one would ever know I'd once been a milkman and that the stars were green because I'd once fought with an underground cow. Or maybe I'd go back to the sandy island and wait for the old woman to die and take over her job. I'd learn to ride those horses instead of just looking at them. And I'd go feral just like those horses. And if anyone ever washed up on shore, they'd be shocked at how wild I looked - but I'd set them at ease and teach them the ways of the island.

My only fear was that, if I ever were to pursue such a path, there would be serious repercussions for all of those left behind. I had responsibilities now - if I left, Stormy would be all alone in the world. I couldn't let that happen.

Then there was the sound of bikes and I turned my head - a mom and dad, a little girl and a boy who looked to be about 10 were riding their bikes out my way. The dad stopped and spotted me among the ruins.

"Hey guys, let's go over this way" = and he was pointing to the other side of the spit. Away from me. Nice families came out here on their bikes on the weekends to have picnics.

The mom and the girl stopped and saw me too.

"Come on - this way." Dad said.

The little boy ran over anyways - "Totally drunk" he yelled.

I watched as the mom and dad put their kickstands down and then the dad was unpacking stuff from the basket on the back of his bike.

Maybe one day, I'd be out here with Stormy and our kids. Once I was established. And if I saw some poor guy passed out on the rocks, I'd offer him a bun or a drink of water or something. After all, You never know if your midnight ramblings might bring you back to a warm bed with your wife in a nice neighborhood or to a cold pile of rocks sticking out into the sea.

I figured I'd better get up and get back home.

With a lot of stiffness and a sickening feeling in my head and stomach, I got to my feet. I was all dirty and dusty, so I brushed myself off. The girl was staring at me from over there - I waved like everything was fine. My uniform was a mess.

As a representative of the milkmen, and therefore of the Department of Lactic Affairs, I thought it was my responsibility to reassure these people that everything was under control.

“Hey folks!” I said as I walked over - they looked up =- shielding their eyes from the law sun. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m out here on official milkman business and that there’s nothing to worry about.”

The little boy had a thin face with a thin nose - he was sneering at me through his squinty eyes.

“Why don’t you bugger off - you bum.”

“Ronnie!” His mom shouted.

“Okay, well have a nice day!”

So I began the long awful walk back home. - but pretty soon after a rock landed just off to my left -

“Ronnie!” The mom’s voice rang out -

Then another rock fell. I looked back and little Ronnie was winding up to throw another at me.

“Bum!” He yelled.

I just walked a little faster. Which was really painful because of how my head felt. My throat was horribly dry. I’d meant to ask the family for some water, but then I forgot.

I remembered the fight with the bartender. Hopefully I hadn't said anything stupid. I think people were staring at me as I stumbled around. I was talking to myself...I felt even sicker when I remembered. I wasn't just talking, I was nearly shouting. And in my uniform too.

Bit by bit, images from the party came back to me - unbidden and unwanted. I remembered the smell of the fish stew and felt even sicker.

The fish stew - that's what we had at professor manstone's party. I might as well tell you about it now since otherwise you won't know why Stormy was going to be mad at me later.

When it was time to eat, we were all sitting at a big table with all these professors and professor Manstone and his wife. She'd made this fish soup that was full of clams and shrimp. But the clams were still in their shells and the shrimp were also still in their shells...So all these guys in suits were pulling the shrimps out and ripping the shells off before eating them. They put all the shells on a plate that was right in front of me. The little black dots of their eyes were all staring at me from the plate - look Howie, they said - you've got soup spots all over your uniform. And as I looked down, I realized that it was true. The brown broth had splashed on my immaculate white uniform and I'd have to go through the rest of the night like that.

I was really hungry, but I couldn't figure out how the shells came off and I was getting little cuts on my fingers. I wanted nothing more than to eat a couple of these little mocking bastards...but I just couldn't. I would have asked Stormy to help me out, but they'd put her right beside Professor Manstone at the head of the table and he was talking to her in some other language, trying to impress her, I thought.

“Ognuno vede quello che tu pari, pochi sentono quello che tu se’

She laughed at this - she didn't even notice that I wasn't getting anything to eat. Or that some other professor kept asking me these ridiculous questions.

“So Howie - what's it like? Having to talk to all those [ordinary?] people every day? Do you get a sense of the mood of the citizenry?”

Then another guy put his hand on the other's arm -

“We can’t ask him that. These milkmen. It’s hard for them to talk about what it’s like out there.”

Then he gave me a knowing smile - like he understood the struggles of the milkman.

I looked down at the translucent shells of the fallen shrimp. “What the hell does this guy know about the struggles of the milkman?” They asked.

And I gave both the professors a stony cold glare...then I looked down into the stained napkin on my knees.

“You know...sometimes I feel like us milkmen are the only thing standing between the nice lives of you ordinary citizens and horrors you can’t even imagine.”

The two egg heads nodded solemnly.

Then they sipped their wine. Professor Manstone had opened a couple of bottles that were more than thirty years old from his basement. I guess these old guys had a lot of clutter to get rid of. Stormy drank some, but I didn’t want to.

I eventually managed to get some shrimp down and some broth. Thankfully there was some bread there too or I would have starved...

But now, here on the spit, walking back home in the uncaring morning light, the thought of those slippery little creatures made me feel ill...

There were lots of birds here...

After what seemed like a very long time, I got where the spit met the mainland...and I walked along the streets again...

I took a long drink from a water fountain in a park I passed. The soft municipal water felt good going down.

There weren't many cars around at all, which was odd.

Then I remembered - when Stormy and I got to professor Manstone's house I saw that he had a red enzerotto sports car in the driveway. I'd never seen one before. I figured it wouldn't hurt if I sat in it - I wanted to check out the dashboard.

"Howie! What are you doing?" Stormy asked when I went over to the car...

She looked amazing all dressed up in her black dress and with all that makeup.

"It's okay, we're guests, right?"

But when I tried to open the car door, it didn't open. I guess he must have locked the doors.

"I guess he locked the doors..." I said.

"That's what people in the big city do, Howie."

No one on St Gaff's ever locked their car doors like that. I thought I'd ask professor Manstone if I could sit in it when I got inside -

But when we went in - I got really nervous. All these men were standing around with drinks and suits and serious looks on their faces. The house was huge - bigger than Mr. Greenwood's. There was a piano right in the living room.

The only other woman there, Linda, was professor manstone's wife, and, I learned later, she was one of the only women professors at the university. She took our coats and seemed much friendlier than everyone else - Stormy wanted to talk more with Linda, but she said she had to go finish making the stew.

So there we were...stranded and knowing no one in this sea of serious intellectuals.

Professor Manstone came over - he was short and dignified and the oldest one there. He told us that professor Lamy wasn't feeling well and couldn't make it. Then he offered to make us drinks - Stormy said she'd love one...he took her to the kitchen to make her a gin and tonic and told me to mingle. I just stood there...there were groups - circles of professors all turned inward.

When Stormy came back, we started talking to all sorts of people - professors of botany and phrenology and government and physics. Every group we visited started with the same question - why are you in uniform. And I gave each group the same answer - "I'm on call. I might have to go at any moment. Being a milkman isn't just some 5-2 type job. You guys know we don't just deliver milk, right?"

This always seemed to work - I told them about investigating subversives and how I couldn't talk about my work at the experimental labs. They always laughed nervously, since none of their book learning prepared them for what it was really like.

I loved the feeling of giving these sheltered bookworms a taste of reality.

Maybe these guys had written important articles about ancient screwdrivers or whatever, but I knew what it was really like - I'd fought and I'd died - I'd changed the color of the stars. I could never make them really understand. Finally one asked me the right kind of question -

"So you were on St. Gaff's when the geyser erupted?"

"Yes - I made it erupt."

"You did? I see."

ANOTHER GUY -

“And you summoned a whale? Hahah.”

“Yes - I was surprised too, to be honest.”

He turned to another guy - “the further from the center you get, the wilder these stories are.” The other one nodded.

“It was in the newspaper.”

“Yes, yes, it was...haha”

Then we met the dashing professor Tremblay. He’d given a talk earlier about his new book, ‘Slipping towards Servitude: The Economics of Enslavement in the interwar period’ The dinner was really for him.

At dinner, most of the conversation revolved around his theories - one by one the others asked him questions like they were firing canons at the city walls. Even though they all tried to sound humble and like some random thought had just passed through their brains. But everyone could see they’d been thinking all night long about ways of tripping the guy up. But he had these white teeth and winning smile and every canon ball just bounced off him harmlessly. He was sitting on the other side of Stormy - I watched helplessly from down the table as he showed her how to peel the stupid greasy shrimp we were supposed to be eating.

I was just about home by this point. The streets were pretty empty, even for a Saturday. Some shops were open...lots were closed.

Then I remembered why - it was Dominion Day. The day when we Towlanders celebrate all of the colonies we have dominion over. There were lots of military parades and at the exhibition grounds, there were rides and games. When I was really young, they used to have a game where you could throw a ball and make a colonial subject fall into a tub of cold water. I never got to throw a ball, but it was fun to

watch. They stopped, though, because some people thought it was against our principles of equality and freedom.

I walked up Tootingham street, desperate to apologize to Stormy and have a long nap. When I turned the doorknob, though, I was seized with terror - the door was locked. I didn't have a key. I knocked - no answer. I pounded. No answer - but some woman stuck her head out of a window and shouted at me to be quiet.

I'd finally been shut out of my own home...my worst fear had come true. Stormy was in there, I was sure, and she'd decided she didn't want me back at all.

My worst fear was going to come true today - I was going to become a homeless man. Locked out of every decent home and shunned by all decent society. I had a woman and a job and now I'd squandered it all away...

I walked off. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered...Maybe I could go to my mother's place. She always had an open door...there was always a light on there...but I knew she'd denounced me to the police.

My only chance was to try and patch things up with Stormy...Maybe I could get her the new kitchen knife she wanted or some some lingerie...

But then the sound of drums drew me to the nearest street. There was a sparse crowd along the sidewalks - and there was the local regiment. I heard that they'd managed to take some village on the border and now they were back for a rest and a celebration.

They were supposed to be marching in order, but they weren't. There were three guys all walking arm in arm up at the front. I knew them - they were in my grade at school. They'd all joined up for the war when I went off to St. Gaff's. Everyone was cheering and the three guys - they were smiling and their eyes were brimming. But you could tell they'd been through a lot and probably saw their comrades getting blown up. They looked a lot older now.

I knew one day they'd all be reminiscing at the legion hall over glasses of beer, talking about how Jimmy got his legs blown off or how Jenny's head got blown off by a canon ball. The milkmen didn't have a legion hall - we had to swallow up all our sins and regrets and memories and keep them to ourselves. That was the price we paid for being in the service.

Part of me almost wished that I'd gone ahead and joined the army...maybe I'd missed something...But then I reminded myself that I had a higher calling. I had my own stories to tell. Maybe I'd get lucky, I thought, and I'd get to tell them some day.

Then out of the corner of my eye I saw, on the other side of the street, Stormy - she had two big paper bags full of groceries. I guess she must have gone out shopping and then stopped to watch all the soldiers. She looked so happy and carefree with the sun on her face. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her smile like that...

When the soldiers and the band had passed, I crossed the street to where she was. She'd just set off for home...

"Stormy!"

It was like a cloud passed over her when she saw me and it felt awful. She wasn't happy to see me - probably because of the fight last night.

It wasn't even a fight, really. I'd just lost my temper a bit and said some things I shouldn't have a bit too loudly.

After dinner at professor Manstone's, Stormy and me were standing in line with professor Tremblay. We were waiting because professor Manstone had hired a cigar maker to make fresh cigars for after dinner. Tremblay was asking me questions - at least he was taking a genuine interest in me. I was telling him I'd just gotten here and was planning on moving up the ladder with the department.

"So one day you'll be head of the mik station? Haha"

“I think so. For a while, but then I want to get an office job downtown.”

“And you’ll raise a whole brood of little milkmen? Haha - it’s an important job. Where would we be without our coffee cream, eh?”

“Exactly. A lot of people don’t get that - how important it is to our civilization and way of life.”

“Yes...heaven forfend that we should use powdered milk. Haha”

This guy really got it, I thought,

By that time, we’d gotten to the front of the line. I went to the cigarmaker and asked him what I should have.

“Not much of a smoker?”

“Not really. I smoke a pipe sometimes.”

“I’ll make you up something light. You really gonna let that guy laugh at you like that? In front of your girl?”

“Huh?”

“I heard that prick - if someone talked to me like that, I’d punch him right in the mouth - he’s making fun of you. Right to your face.”

I looked back and Tremblay was telling Stormy a joke and she slapped him playfully on the shoulder.

“Stop!” She said.

Was the cigar maker right?

The cigar roller handed me my cigar with raised eyebrows.

“I wouldn’t take that shit from anyone.”

I went over and took Stormy by the hand - “Can I talk to you a minute?”

And I sort of led her out onto the back porch where a few guys were smoking. We went to a corner where no one else was.

“So I guess he’s a lot funnier than I am?”

“What?”

“It’s late, we should get going.”

“No, I’m having a nice time. And we never go out. What’s wrong with you?”

“Well I’ve been up since 4 and I’m exhausted so let’s go.”

“You go if you want to.”

“Fine.”

And I walked right through the house to the front door. I put my hand on the door knob and thought - if I leave, Stormy's going to be here alone with that creep. So I marched right back to the porch.

And sure enough - there was professor Tremblay with that permanent infuriating smile talking to Stormy again.

"Stormy - we have to go."

Before she could say anything Tremblay piped up.

"Stormy was just telling me that you wanted to get some rest."

"That's right."

"That's fine - I'll make sure she gets home safe."

"No - you should come with me."

Anyways, one thing led to another, and before I knew it, I was shouting about how if she wanted to spend all her time with these egg heads that was fine with me - all these old guys did was write books and blabber a lot. I'd made the stars change color - and I wasn't even twenty yet.

The peckerhead who'd been nodding at me at dinner was nodding again.

"Shell shock," He said to his neighbor.

Then I stormed out, feeling like a complete idiot.

And now here I was, walking back home with Stormy. She didn't seem that mad, even. She just wanted to get home.

"Listen, Stormy, you wanted to be with a milkman - well, this is what it's like. There's things I can't talk about."

She looked at me like I was some sort of idiot - she just didn't get it.

I promised I'd behave better in the future. I helped her carry the groceries. We didn't really talk that much.

Work went on as usual...Mr Dwyer the milk station boss really had it out for me - he had this suspicion that I was a slacker and he was always questioning the milk bottle count and telling me it was taking me too long to do my rounds.

"I'm no pushover like Billings. You step out of line once, Coxwell, and you'll be out on your ear. I don't care whose ass you kissed to get here."

I don't know what his problem was. I did my rounds just like everyone else.

Back home, we'd settled into the usual routine. We talked mostly about managing the household - how much we could spend on groceries and how we could save up a bit at a time for a new kitchen table and maybe one day a radio so we could finally listen to Eliza Pike. I found it all pretty boring, but it seemed to be about the only thing Stormy wanted to talk to me about.

Until one rainy evening, there was a knock at the door. I opened it and there was a guy with a hat and a raincoat pulled up close to his face. He shoved a bunch of papers at me.

"Howie Coxwell?"

"Yes"

“You’ve been served.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you have to go to court when the papers say.”

“What for?”

“How the hell should I know?”

Then he walked away..

Inside, I tossed the papers on the table.

“What’re those?” Stormy asked.

“I have to go to court for something,”

She looked through them -

“You’ve been charged with murder! It says that because you’re a milkman you don’t have to wait for the trial in jail. But we have to get a lawyer - right away. Oh my God...how much is that going to cost?”

“How much is it going to cost? I might get sent to jail for the rest of my life. They might execute me!”

“You’re innocent, right?”

“Of course!”

“So we just have to focus on getting a good lawyer. You’ll have to tell Mr. Dwyer you’ve got to take the day off tomorrow to look for one.”

“No way! He’ll kill me if I take any time off.”

“Howie...you’ve been charged with murder.”

“Okay, fine I’ll tell him. But he’s gonna doc my pay - at least.”

The next morning I showed up for work and took the truck out. I had no intention of taking the day off or telling anyone about the murder charges. I figured I could look for one on after work or on a break or something. I hadn’t noticed any law offices on my route, but I’d keep my eyes peeled...

And then something weird happened. I was delivering milk to one house - and I recognized the kid playing out front. It was the kid from the spit the other morning. It was quite a coincidence - I must have been delivering milk to his family and never recognized them.

“Hey buddy!”

He just sneered at me.

I knocked and his mom opened the door. I thought she probably recognized me, but I didn’t want to say anything. But then something occurred to me - I had an opportunity to show them that I was a responsible citizen and not just some bum.

“Excuse me, mrs. You seem like you know the neighborhood around here and I’m pretty new to the area. I have some legal business to attend to - do you happen to know where I can find a lawyer?”

“Hmmm....what kind of lawyer? Civil, criminal?”

“Definitely criminal.”

She gave me a wary look - "You could try Mr. Donaldson. Around the corner above the shoe repair place."

"Thanks!"

I figured I was probably ahead of schedule, so I decided to leave my truck for a minute and go see if I could talk to the lawyer.

But seconds later, I heard my milk truck's engine start- before I could get back to it, it took off down the street!

I cursed myself for not locking the doors...I ran after the truck...whoever was driving didn't know what they were doing. The gears were grinding, it was braking too hard...but I couldn't catch up...it went around a corner and I went down an alley to try and cut it off...and ended up in a dingy hallway...The gaslamps were flickering...it stank and there were all these brown doors.

I tried one after another - they were all locked except one.

I went in and there was an old woman lying there - I felt like I'd known her in another life. She was on the floor with a coma mask over her face, pumping air from a small gas powered machine...her eyes were closed. I stood and I stood and she didn't move - then her finger twitched - and I knew she was coming out of the coma...but she didn't move for a long time. Then a nurse came in. Her gown was all ripped and bloodstained = I looked - "From the last victim," she explained.

"Her finger moved," I said, "I think she's coming out of it."

"The fingers twitch. The eyes flutter - sometimes there's a mumble...but she's not coming out of it" the nurse said... "You'll always think she's coming out of it - but she's not."

I kept watching and watching...but there were no more twitches...so I left....

I just walked along because I could hear something - down at the end of the hall a man had his back to me...he was hunched over something....he was eating...slurping. I got closer - it was Stan - he was lifting

eyeballs covered with connective tissue out of a bowl and eating them...He noticed me....wiped his mouth a turned around.

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought you wanted to see me?”

“You’re supposed to be doing your job.”

“Someone stole my truck.”

He stood up - he was tall now. Glowering at me.

“Don’t you remember what you’re supposed to be doing here?”

“Of course! You need help with the experiments - to get the phlogesterion and make the gas.”

He grabbed my uniform with one hand and pulled me close - then - he slapped me really hard across the face.

“You’re a stupid, stupid boy, Howie. Don’t you remember why you were sent back?”

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welcome to this episode of the milkman of St gaffes today I'd like to thank a few new patrons first of all Miriam a department of lactic affairs radio Clark thank you very much Chris do nee apprentice merry rose Larkin Fleiss prayer and no %HESITATION Henriksen Fleiss prayer thank you very much for your support I really appreciate it I also wanted to mention that I got a lot of really nice feedback about the episode called birthday where how we had his birthday that seemed to really hit a nerve for a lot of people

and so that was really nice to hear I always appreciate hearing that and %HESITATION I also got a lot of questions about the song that was featured pretty prominently in that episode and they realize that I've been a little negligence with the show notes in the transcripts I should %HESITATION be able to get back on top of all of that later on in in August but I wanted to %HESITATION mentioned that the name of the person who made the song was Ronnie bar hat das the last name is H. A. D. A. S. and the song I actually got the song through our list DOT Ohio where I got a got a lot of my %HESITATION sound effects and and some of the music and %HESITATION it was really just one of those things where I I had this episode and I was looking around for a a piece of music for and I came across that and the lyrics were just absolutely perfect and it just gave me goose bumps it was such a perfect song for the for the episode in the great whaler must've been smiling at me %HESITATION for for that particular moment but %HESITATION you can actually hear the song should be available on Spotify and other streaming services I I used a licensed version but you can %HESITATION find her music all over the place %HESITATION it's not just on %HESITATION these %HESITATION music subscription websites and so today's episode is called night shift it's time for the milk man of saying gas starring how we stupid stupid boy how he don't you remember why you were sent back I stumbled out side my face is still smarting from stands beating it really seemed unnecessary to me I done everything he asked I was ready to go look for the way a loyal he wanted to make the special gas that would win the war I already knew why I'd been sent back from the grave I take it on a tremendous responsibility when I took Stormi under my wing but maybe Stan was right maybe I wasn't doing right by her she was the woman of my dreams after all and we weren't even married I looked up to the happens to make a vow to treat her better in the future but I was taken aback by what I saw the heavens were much closer than they were supposed to be and they were all lumpy it was like this guy was a black blanket with points of light they were weighed down by a bunch of rolling boulders it seemed to be just a hundred feet or so above my head and I was gripped by this awful terror that this guy was going to fall in my head and suffocate me so I ran headlong through the weird streets a neighborhood I'd never seen in hopes never to see again the house is old old an ornate and the error sticky and much too close I tried to run headlong into the opposite direction of wherever I'd been which turned out to be nearly impossible this guy kept closing in the stars all went out and left a rusty arch way there was a stench beyond anything I'd ever smelled before I could hardly take a breath for fear of retching it was nearly too dark for me to see anything my feet were sloshing around in some liquid then I could see that I was in a tunnel a sewer from the smell I thought I was just going to pass out from the gas and drowned in the black sludge I made my way step by step but something curled around my ankle and I felt dear god I was covered in the stuff I got up trying to hold my breath and taking little sips of air my head was late and I was seeing stars when in some dim glow from overhead I saw the shape of a ladder I gasp hard and pulled myself up the air got less horrifying as they went up but when I got to the street level there was a manhole cover with little black holes in the crisscross pattern of the metal I pushed but it was too heavy I had to bang and yell and I had to bang for a long time because it was nice it might have been ten minutes or two hours but eventually some nice lady heard me dear how did you get in there I just fell in can you please just get me out she waddled off in a long while later a cop appeared with some kind of tool to lift the lid up I scramble to the top how the blazes did you get down what you're a milkman I didn't want to stick around to explain myself and the copper was a bit of a pudgy ball so I just ran off I got home and I had to knock since they still didn't have any keys stormy came down and open the door she penned sure knows where have you been you smell like poop how E. I fell in the sewer she walked away with her arm over her face we'll get that stuff off it reeks and Mr Dwyer was here looking for you mad as hell about the loss truck goddammit I thought he'd found out about the stolen

truck probably he was going to blame me instead of the thief I peeled off my uniform it was all stained black I got my soggy boots off and put them by the door in the bathroom I got a towel and rinsed myself off a bit the towel turn kind of black too but I just turned it around the other way and hung it back up then I had a shower which is probably what I should have done first I thought I might fall asleep under the wimpy stream of water but at least there was a shower instead of a bath tub I had to share with everyone on the floor look back and say gaffes I didn't even eat the dinner that was in the kitchen you're not even going to eat I just went right to bed trying to understand what Stan had told me I drifted off to the sound of washing going on downstairs I slept like I'd been hit on the head and knocked out they were disjointed dreams I saw stormy come in in the dim this of the room and get undressed and I felt like a lucky guy look at this prince of the city waltzing in here without a care in the world listen you sack a cap you I'm taking the money to fix that try to go to your pay and you're paying for all the milk you lost to he found the truck yes some pencil make kid took it and ran it into a tree the stupid bastard was knocked out his parents say they're going to sue what the hell's wrong with you leaving the keys in the truck it wasn't my fault I there was an open manhole cover and I wanted to close it before anyone got hurt and I accidentally fell in okay it wasn't my best effort a quick thinking but it was partly true right you fell in the sewer yeah with all that disgusting black sludge down there in uniform yes he walked right up close to me looked me up and down he grabbed the lapel of my uniform and felt the material between his finger and thumb listen kid you and I both know that you're full of shit I don't know what the higher ups were thinking when they brought you here but they're going to figure out the truth about you pretty soon and when they do not only will you not be delivering milk ever again someone's gonna slip you a bad bottle if you catch my drift I didn't say anything now get the hell out of my sight you're late already %HESITATION it was only a bit later on my rounds but I figured it out I was handing some lady a bottle of milk when I noticed how clean and white my uniform was how then it dawned on me story must have stayed up late washing and ironing it so I could go into work today back in the truck I just sat there for a minute and let it all sink in if I'd gone in with a filthy stinking uniform Mr Dwyer might've believe my story about the stolen truck as it was he now thought I was a complete liar I let out a deep sigh in a lot of ways stormy was still just a kid of course I loved her very much and I knew she meant well but sometimes I wish she's smart enough of it to the ways of the world I made up my mind though that I wasn't going to say anything to her about the uniform I didn't want to hurt her feelings in fact as the day went on I thought that maybe I should do something nice for her I reflected that it's really interesting how sometimes when someone makes an innocent mistake it's endearing like when a kitten gets its head stuck in a paper bag or when a little kid falls down the stairs anyways the rest of the shift was pretty regular when I was just about home I remembered that I'd forgotten to get something for stormy I just went in anyways how is work she was reading a magazine on the couch fine listen stormy thanks for cleaning my uniform I was gonna get you something but I didn't get a chance she smiled that was really nice okay should we go see the lawyer she said sure wanna get hot dogs for dinner after sounds like a plan and %HESITATION we went into the reddish light of the late afternoon %HESITATION I think you never had a hot dog before coming to Ming's fight with me I saw one in a book when I was a kid I asked my dad if we could get one and he said only the fans his people in the big cities are allowed to eat them really no you're doing bad yes of course I've had hot dogs before it was a nice walk the lawyer though wasn't much help he told us that he couldn't represent me because of course parricide wasn't an offense against the state it was seen as an offense against the great whaler himself the case was going to be tried an ecclesiastical court so that was a pointless visit but stormy and I did get our hot dogs and we had dinner on a bench in Redford square downtown this was the biggest square in the city and there was a big monument in the middle with a

statue of a general and a bunch of Wales we sat and watched all the people going hither and yon we made fun of their clothes as the sun went down our bellies were full we were laughing and all the way back I never thought about what it meant that I was going to be tried in a church court I kept a low profile at work the next couple of days to try and smooth things over with the wire by doing my rounds really quickly but one day after work I saw two priests in dark crimson robes talking to him he bawled me as I walked by with a baleful smile the priests were talking in hushed tones but Dwyer wasn't yeah sure all testify that reminded me that the lawyer told me I should go to the cathedral of St slamming on the east side of the city to find someone to defend me so after work I made my way over there this was the extra poor part of the town where the pirate kids used to be the cathedral was huge made of some yellowish stone it wasn't being taken really good care of there were cracks in the stone were little plants and even a couple of small bushes were growing I've never been inside before and I was really surprised at how dark it was it was much wider than father Wieland stretch and had four rows of columns instead of two and the columns were huge like the biggest trees you've ever seen they were little sculptures all over the columns and walls little devils an impish faces grinning at me and a bunch of oblivious angels the whale bones were way up high and they were bundled together in groups and stacked on top of each other across the arches I guess because the place was so big but the bones didn't give off a lot of light they look dirty and dusty and I guess no one ever got up there to clean them there were a few old men preying on the pews one was an old milkman's uniform which made sense because same Fleming was the patron Saint of milkmen there were paintings from his life on the walls Fleming finding milk underneath like how inventing the milk bottle bringing fresh milk to the thirsty apostles of the whaler the whole place made me feel peaceful and at home I sat in a pew and gazed upon the countenance of the gray whale or up front I just let all my thoughts roll around in my head for awhile until I saw a priest come out in long flowing white robes he had a pad of paper and a pen and seem to be counting up the candles I got up excuse me Sir father fathers sorry he turned around he was maybe sixty with a rocky face when he looked at me it was like his eyes grabbed me around the neck and forced me to pay attention to everything he said what can I do for you my son I knew from experience that when you want to ask someone a favor it's better to do it in an indirect method I am highly a milkman from the island of St gaffes I was an apostle of father wheeling and he always told me that I should come to this cathedral since it was the most beautiful one in the city and his old mentor was the head priest there he found a bit father we'll certainly fellow loves fish sandwiches I don't have any recollection of a father Wieland but I'll leave you to your prayers he turned to go wait he turned back I also wanted to ask you if you could do me a favor yes my son you want to confess no definitely not I am innocent he looked confused I mean father Abraxas father of praxis I've been charged with murder the murder of my own father there's going to be a trial and I need a lawyer a church lawyer we were up by the altar and I thought maybe he'd take me into the back room like father wheeling used to do but he didn't he just studied my worried face then he looked up at the lofty ceiling it is our duty to defend mankind against the gods through prayers and sacrifice it is only fitting that we are well suited to the role of defense lawyers but tell me my son you say you are innocent I am completely innocent it happened because I'm a seeker and so it wasn't even my fault he recoiled a bit a seeker I don't think that's possible it's true I made the geyser happened on the island did you see the newspapers I did the geological society concluded that it was simply a Fisher a release of a large deposit of sulfuric gas that's why the entire island now smells of sulfur the island doesn't smell of sulfur the reporters must be lying I really am a seeker I summoned a whale he still looked very doubtful I read about that too but as you say reporters often lie if you are a seeker we could consider an exorcism to drive the evil spirits from you sure that would be fine father but could we do it after the trial I will think about your request my son

the trial is a major commitment and I have my duties here in fact I've got to get back to my inventory come see me in a week but I think the priests in red are already getting ready to go after me I saw two of them talking to my boss red robes you say yes dark red they are from the order of Tertullian they must have put Wilson in charge of the prosecution and his eyes smoldered with anger Wilson doesn't play by the book he's always fudging is numbers trying to boost his budget perhaps this will be my chance to expose him for the crook that he is and send him flailing into the abyss of fire he was getting really worked up yes father I think that makes a lot of sense I will take your case return on Monday afternoon and we shall go through all the details thank you so much father I turned to go but then decided to ask him about something else since he was there anyways father yes what is it does it ever happen that the gods ask us to do things we just can't do yes my son the gods very often demand of us precisely that which we can never deliver the whaler was unique among mankind for plunging into the depths and bringing back the first Selena the gods love nothing more than toying with us catching us in the snares and hooks of fate the last part was very uplifting but at least he agreed to defend me I guess you could really tell that I was innocent stormy was definitely impressed when I told her I'd found someone to defend me I still didn't know when the trial date was probably I had to read through all the notices I've been getting in the mail on Friday night it was finally time to go to the experimental labs to look for some flood just steering and I took the subway up and made my story way through the ugly muddy brown neighborhood to the gate then passed to the cow Alectra Q. centers you may when I got to the actual lab it was a huge room full of weird machines but the biggest machine looks sort of like a tall pile of oversized trash cans a lot of them maybe ten with wires and lights at the base there was a machine as big as a truck with a lot of gears and dogs and you could push and pull there was a final where I suppose we were supposed to pour the liquid and a spell where I guess the other liquid would come out it was bigger than the thermal Leiser but didn't look as fancy the milk man there wasn't very talkative hi there Mister Cox well I'm from the milk sciences department I see you've discovered the crop plus skill later that's the machine that will make the gas type type better not talk about it even here instanton he had to be somewhere else what do I do have a seat on the stool that's fine I'm just going to fit these electrodes to your head don't mind the wires okay good I'll be monitoring everything from here now up get up good okay now just stop over here please yes right in there but it's just a closet yes I'm sorry ideally we'd have a sensory deprivation chamber but it's war time so we make do with what we've got there should be a little pension there okay good have a seat I'm going to close the door now and just like that I was there freezing my eyes took a moment to adjust there was a cold breeze and I hugged myself for warmth it was slippery and there was a light in my eyes I took it all in I was on an ice flow and I couldn't move too far one way or another without tipping the thing any little movement in my boot slipped there were other little ice islands all around I was in some Arctic Ocean they were icy mountains in the distance and I was facing the fading light of the low northern sun what was I supposed to do here how was I supposed to find any oil I looked down into the water it was pitch black I still thought I saw things moving around down there but if they expected me to dive down there they were crazy I just sat down to keep warm and sort of huddled there watching the sun sink and sink I shivered it was almost silent except the ice made cracking sounds maybe this is what the whole world was like if you took away all the other noises just silence and calm except that the foundations were cracking and you could fall in at any moment I got so cold I started to feel warm my fingers turn blue the sun never quite went down I watched it dipped and dipped but then again still reason it just started to go up again the late was weird like an eclipse then when I was just about to fall asleep from the cold I saw on the horizon the black sails the black hole I thought I heard ropes pulling and stretching the wind picked up I stood I wave my arms but they were too far off to see me somehow I knew there'd be someone on there

that I recognize I didn't know if this was a spell or real and I thought I might freeze to death if I stayed still any longer so he screwed up my courage and jumped on to the next flow it was like slow motion in one of the scariest things I've ever felt but my boots slipped out from underneath me and I fell right in my bite it hurt like hell but expanded up the shift tactic was getting away from me they jump again and I landed on my feet I jumped again and landed solidly then again and again I showed in ways I jumped a slipped a slip right over the edge and into the stabbing cold waters it was all black and I jumped to my feet all I saw was the light coming out from under the door of the closet I slammed myself against the door and fell into the lab hello I was still wet and freezing I ripped this stupid electrodes off my head there was no one here the milk science guy was gone I decided to just go home but the door was locked from the outside what a bastard he just left me in here I thought it was out of the woods but the Canary hadn't sung yet I was so cold there was no heat in here and my uniform was soaked I might freeze to death yes I knew that if I panicked now I might die I had to stay calm and use my mind I knew that without heat I would freeze to death before the morning came I also knew that machines get warm when you turn them on the crepuscular later was the biggest machine in the room so it would be the warmest so I set about turning it on I flicked a few switches I pulled some dogs but nothing happened my uniform was dripping all over the controls I push the red button beside the spout and some lights came on it made a gurgling noise and some drops came out of the spokesman I was afraid it might start shooting poison gas out of me so I bang the CPO really hard to keep her from issuing any noxious gases but the thing started making even weirder noises so I pulled more knobs the noises continued and around the back and unplug the stupid thing but it just kept going and now smoke was coming out of the top I ran to the door and banged on it Hey let me have I tried the doorknob again and the door opened I guess I hadn't turned it the right way before knows anyways I got out of there as fast as I could in the hallway I ran into the scientist he was picking his teeth with a toothpick and looked pretty shocked to see me %HESITATION here okay sure I'm okay except that it was freezing in there did you find any of the liquid no I was stuck on a floating piece of ice interesting he brightened up still it looks as if you'll fare better than the last boy okay rest up and then we'll see you back here next Friday for another try the subways are running this late I'll have someone drive you home a fin milkman with droopy dead eyes named Herman picked me up at the front gate and a milk truck we drove through the city and it was about three o'clock Saturday morning no one was around it was nice to have someone else driving I had the chance to look around it must have rain while I was out on the ice because everything glistened golden black from the gas lamps in the moon's it felt like the city streets were exhaling in relief now that all the city people were done walking all over the place with all their busyness and noise the houses in the pavements had a whole new personality when they were left to themselves and I thought I had a lot more in common with the dreaming nighttime city than I did with the bustling daytime one when I got home I thank told Herman and went in quietly I took off my boots it was dark I told story not to wait out for me but I was a bit surprised she hadn't I like to smell in here and the feeling of closing the door and being in my own place it was starting to feel like home the weekend was great I slept in a long time on Saturday and woke up in our sunny little room with the crisp clean sheets I just laze around awhile and then we had bacon and eggs and tea for breakfast it was heavenly on Sunday stormy and I went for a long walk on the waterfront we got some ice creams and watch the ships coming and going from the harbor I decided to just tell her about what had happened at the lab she already pretty much knew everything about my spells and what the milkman or up to despite all my efforts to keep it a secret I mean I didn't tell her it was a weapons program but I did tell her about the closet in the ice and the ship there's one thing I don't understand how we are you actually being transported to these places or is it just like a dream that's a silly question anyway the episode wasn't so

bad as some I've had if I had to do is deliver milk and do that every Friday night this will be fine and really I'd seen stormy smile more often in the past few days and she had for a long time before everything was going great until late Sunday afternoon there was a knock on the door we weren't expecting anyone mom I recoiled in my stomach clenched when I saw her standing there with addition her hands my first instinct was to slam the door in her face but I felt like I just couldn't I thought you might like something home cooked for dinner she held off the big dish covered in wax paper it was heavy and warm thanks anyway he's I don't want to disturb you too much no no just hold on I'll put this in the kitchen I left her standing there while I went back in who is it story asked my mother what maybe she changed her mind about the case just hang on I put the dish on the counter and went back to the front door but my mother was gone the door was swinging open I looked up and down the street but she wasn't there how strange back in the kitchen I peeled back the wax paper it was some sort of shepherd's pie my most feared childhood dish the way she made at the potatoes were always soggy on the bottom and the meat was full of liquid but I wasn't a kid anymore I could assert myself we're not eating this why don't you just tell her you didn't want to ask she's my mother I thought that would be the end of it but the trouble she caused was only just beginning in the morning when I was trying to get to work I couldn't find my boots they weren't in the door where I'd left them I looked all over stormy helped but they were nowhere to be found there was only one conclusion about what had happened even though it made no sense I flushed all the shepherd's pie down the toilet you go right to your mother's house now and return the dash and tell her you need your boots back I'm sure no one's going to care that much you don't know that here even if you're a few minutes late you can't go in with no boots my mother was still sleeping when I got there so I had to knock and wait and I knocked a few times and I kept waiting it was getting later all the time when she finally opened the door I pushed the empty dish out her thanks for the pie mom now I need my boots back she raised her eyebrows boots work boots really I have to have my boots I don't know about any boots I just turned and laughed pointless I went to the milk station and hoped wire wouldn't notice my canvas shoes but he did what kind of a milk man loses his boots what am I supposed to do with you can I just go in my shoes what are you an idiot no you can't go in your shoes you're gonna have to go to the quartermasters and then come back you'll be %HESITATION most of the day and then I could see that some sort of idea was crawling into his ugly splotch she had he walked up close to me and I could smell his awful breath like a lot of the older milk man he had beer and porridge for breakfast and it stank I don't know why I didn't think of this earlier I'm gonna do your root for you today how he and then I'm replacing you I've got another idea for you as of today you're on the night shift there is no night shift he put his finger in my chest like Billings had done so long ago that's what you think it's a special route just for you full of freaks and weirdos maybe you'll make a friend you go get your boots and report back for duty at ten tonight but that means I'll have to sleep all day I have a girlfriend at home and I have to prepare for my trial he just smiled and his lips parted a bit and I could see his little brown teeth those are your orders kid you're out of my hair stormy was not happy at all when I told her I told you you needed your boots it's not my fault how was I supposed to know my mother would steal them she's insane how E. she's not insane maybe she wasn't before but she is now and I don't want her anywhere near this house again maybe you're right anyways I'll have to do the night shift the rest of the week but on Friday I'll go talk to stand and get it all worked out I can't do Friday night night shifts and then do the experiments that night I walked to the milk station I was already a little tired how was I going to stay up all night and who gets milk deliveries after dark when I got to the station there was a milk truck out front and a boy a milkman at least that's how it looked he was shorter and with spear than me and he had a really pale face with big brown eyes and the sort of frightened look on his face in fact as I find out he always looked a little scared

no matter what hi he said I'm Joseph we're going to be partners now so you've been doing this route by yourself I have so why do you need me he looked like he was about to cry because I can't ever deliver all the milk okay take it easy let's just get going we hopped in the truck I'm how he by the way he didn't say anything just started the truck and drove off looking straight ahead scooped he took a bunch of turns I didn't even think were possible so Joe Joseph please okay so Joseph where are we going the annex there's no place called the annex and Mings bite I lived here all my life I thought so too he took another impossible turn it's where all the artists and writers and antiquarians live they stay up all night and they always want milk and sure enough we were getting into this area I'd never seen before where the houses were taller it was dark maybe people stayed up all night they all must have stayed inside because I didn't see many people around the roads were narrow here but not because it was a poor lane way like my mom street you could tell it was once a really rich neighborhood that everyone had just let go the houses stank of nostalgia even though I've never been here before they were little balconies on the third floors with intricate woodwork I saw a few shadowy figures smoking on a few balconies there were weird addicts and little triangle windows in the Garretts lots of cobwebs stained glass and big ornate doors with the paint peeling off the buildings didn't seem sure that they wanted us here but I couldn't stop staring at them I was drawn to them like no other place I'd ever been Hey Joseph maybe if we split up the deliveries we can get this all done fast and then we won't have to stay up all night we can try sure so who did they hook you up to the machines to what what machines at the labs they wanted me to get the stuff but it didn't work I'm not sure what you're talking about he looked at me and I could tell that he didn't believe me they put me on this route because they thought I could learn the secrets about the stuff from him from who he looked extracellular you'll see I didn't know what he was talking about but I was enjoying myself mostly I knocked and put down the bottles and no one came to the doors but a couple of them did open up a woman in a silky nightgown the smell of cherry pipe smoke came out I loved it another house an old guy with a beard opened he didn't say anything the house six hailed some musty smell that came from my earliest memories I loved this neighborhood at the moment I wanted nothing more than to have one of these houses and to live there I wanted to look at with the little windows and think big artists thoughts in the strange round rooms with the climbing plants growing all over the outside I would get up and make coffee in the musty yellow kitchen and ideas would come to me and I'd write on old crinkled paper watching through the warped windows as stormy tended the garden in the back I bet it never got really sunny here I didn't get why Joe he was so scared of the place it was true that as we went on the houses got bigger and more more falling apart but it didn't seem like we'd be here that long the streets got narrower still then the houses were all towering over us the peak Scott point here the air got thinner and it seemed harder to breathe banjo was getting really agitated and a bit teary again what's wrong it's up there we have to deliver milk there so I've never been able to do it why not I don't know we have to deliver it inside and I can't get inside I was looking at him while he spoke he stopped the truck and then I turned to look it was a dead end street with a big sign that said dad and they were big scared trees but it took a minute for me to process what I was looking at they were all these annex houses and they seem to be stacked one on top of the other diagonally like a staircase if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I wouldn't have believed it was even possible we have to deliver up there to the library in what does he want to bottles of whole but he's never gotten them all do it wait here be careful he's the one who knows he handed me a paper clip for some reason and I took it I leapt out of the truck and grabbed two bottles the last two actually I was going to show this kid how it was done I walked towards the stack of houses but they were further away than I thought I kept walking and they weren't getting closer as fast as they should have been it was getting darker there were a bunch of really little houses that I hadn't noticed before they were wood carvings on

the fronts images of little silver bean headed people and strange runes and markings I couldn't understand as I got to the stack of houses there was a black fog that made it hard to see I heard weird voices like they were chanting I climbed up the first staircase somehow I knew the librarian was the third house the black one there was wrought iron all around the front and I knew I had to get inside past the black wooden door knocking wasn't going to work I appeared in the dirty window beside the door and I could make out stacks of books and a wooden table I heard a voice again like chanting trying to tell me something maybe it got darker and darker and I felt fainter like I was fading away somehow I tried the door but it wouldn't budge in the twilight of my consciousness I remember the paper clip icon vented stuck the key hole and started fiddling as everything got darker and the chanting got louder before I passed out I felt like I'd been enveloped as if in the smelly wings of a black bird %HESITATION

36 THE RADIO PART THREE

Speaker 1: *[00:00:01]* This is episode 36 of The Milkman of Saint Gaffes and absurdist horror podcast. Be sure to start with episode one. Today I'd like to thank a new patron. You clear fly sprayer. Thank you very much for your support, and thank you to everyone for your patience with the delays lately. I should be less busy in the next week or two. This week's episode is called The Radio Part three. It's time for the milkman of saying gas. Starring Howie the milkman. I fell through the feathers. I tried not to breathe the musky air. I fell out into a bright brown sky and watched the fragments of memory falling all around me. Until I landed in an ocean of them like broken shards of glass. And I knew I had to somehow put them all back together again. Before the sky came crashing down on me. But before I could even put two together, I fell down through the sea and out onto a damp, filthy mattress in an alleyway. I would have hurt myself if it hadn't been there. I got up and looked all around. I didn't know exactly where I was, but it looked like the East End. No one was around. A red cat walked by and stared at me like it knew the truth. If I found a Maine road, I could probably make it back home. It wasn't long, though, before I heard the old familiar sound of a milk truck. It stopped at the end of the alley. When I got to it, Joseph was inside. At least now I can give you a ride home. I always had to walk back alone and then take the truck back. This happens every night. Sometimes I don't try to go in his house, but Dwyer gets mad. So you put the mattress. I heard myself the first couple of times. No one touches it. Maybe they know the mattress is haunted and you have the same smell. A horrible puzzle, but I can't put together. We drove back. We didn't say a lot, but it was nice to know that there was someone out there who'd thought ahead and put a mattress down. Take a ride on Rose. I could have broken something. I just looked out my window the whole ride back. It was nice. But that was all past now. Sunday was another story. I watched stormy taking apart the electric red toaster with a screwdriver while Professor Lamb, his little boy, hit him in the head with a teddy bear. Lammy kept telling the kid to stop, but he just wouldn't move. We were supposed to be having a nice Sunday morning breakfast together at his place, but his toaster was broken so we couldn't have any toast. I had a nice cup of tea though, and I was pretty comfortable in the big leather chair. His house was full of bookshelves and antique vases and globes. Now, Sean, please stop. Okay, stop. So stormy. Where did you

learn to do that? Oh, my dad, he was always really good with machines. Oh, is he still in Saint gaffs? I saw stormy flinch a bit, and I figured I'd better jump in at this point. Stormi's dad passed away. Shot down by the police. You didn't hear about it? Oh, no. Professor Lammy said he was searching around for the right words to say. But luckily Mrs. Lamb came in and broke up the awkward silence. Your father was killed by the police? She asked. It was an accident. It's complicated. Stormy said it may have been an accident, but those who get in trouble with the police are usually up to no good of one kind or another. She was a professor of chemistry, and stormy told me afterwards that Mrs. Lamb seemed a bit abrasive. This is great tea, I said. Then she told me all about where she'd gotten it. I didn't really care, since it was probably really expensive, and I was perfectly happy with the Red label stuff we got at home. But I'd learned that complimenting the host about things like that is an important part of social grace. Then the spring came loose. Its back. Now it should pop up fine now. Stormy said, thank you so much, dear Mrs. Lamb. He took the toaster back to the kitchen and got to work making toast for us right now. We heard the kid having a meltdown in the kitchen. Lamb walked in with some nice brown toast and jam, but the kid was still hitting him, punching him in the leg. Then he picked up an old vase and was about to throw it, but lamb grabbed it out of his hand. Stop it! Stop it! We were a bit taken aback because the professor seemed like such a rational and calm person. He looked at us embarrassed while the kids started to cry. I must apologize. Being a parent, it can take a toll. Overall, it was a nice enough visit. Stormy definitely liked getting out and being social. I thought he'd ask me about all the experiments I'd been doing and if I'd made any progress, but he didn't. After the breakfast meltdown, he was back to his calm, collected self. He just asked about how we were liking living here, and then he wanted to know more about the local traditions of Saint Garth's. I guess he just wanted us to feel at home. Such a nice guy. On the walk home, I got to thinking. Hey, stormy. I didn't know you were good at fixing things. The whole time I was a kid, I was helping my dad out, getting wrenches, feeding solder onto the soldering iron. Well, listen, I'm going to tell you something, but you have to keep it under your hat. The other day, when I was at the lab, I was alone and locked in the room with a big, important machine. I started pushing buttons on it, and I think I broke it a bit. Why were you pushing the buttons and why were you locked in? Oh, I think the lab guy went out for a sandwich or something and locked me in so I wouldn't get out, and I was really cold and thought maybe the machine would be warm. She looked really perplexed. Anyway, the whole project depends on the machine working, and no one's allowed in there except a couple of scientists and me. If they figure out that I broke it, I'll be in big trouble. And we'll probably lose the war, too. What if I brought you with me? Then you could try to fix it. I don't know if I'll be able to fix it. I help my dad a lot, but I'm not a tinker. But maybe you could try. How would I even get into the lab? Leave that to me. I was really tired from the crazy week and the night shift, so I had a long, nice nap while Stormi made dinner. But then I ended up not being able to sleep at night. I went for a long walk down to the harbor. It was nice enough down there, but I missed the same gas harbor. They weren't as many boats, but I never worried about getting stabbed back there. There were a lot of strange people shuffling about in the shadows here, but still the sound of the waves and watching all the masts and the sea air. It was refreshing in a way. On Monday around two, I put my plan into action. I knew from experience that the guards at the front gate of the experimental labs took the afternoons off. Stormy was nervous until I showed her that we could just push the gate open and walk right in. We snuck around behind the quartermasters hut, and then the three mounds of earth along the fence and behind the electrocution stall. No one saw us in here. Someone's going to be in there. Don't worry. Listen, if someone sees us, I'll say Stan wanted to see us when we got lost. I'm kind of an important person around here. They'll cut me some slack. And Stan likes you, so don't worry. Okay? And sure enough, we didn't meet a soul. We sneaked all the way to the laboratory and the

door was open. Wow. I've never seen a machine like this. The thermal visor was actually even more amazing. This baby is called the escalator. Once we get it running properly, it's going to win the war for us. How is it going to win the war? That's totally classified. I went over and locked the door so we wouldn't be disturbed. I showed Stormy where the tools were in a shelf I'd seen the scientist use. She started looking the thing over and tapping it here and there, and I was hit with this irresistible wave of tiredness, and I couldn't ignore it. I'd hardly slept for a long time now. The new schedule was interfering with my rhythms. Listen, I'm going to have a nap, okay? What? No, you have to help me. Just 15 minutes. Okay. Don't look at me like that. Fine. She turned back to the machine. I went into the closet, closed the door, and lay down on the bench. I barely had time to notice the little crack of light under the door when I was just hearing voices. Maybe Stormy was talking to herself, but it wasn't Stormy. It was sailors. The smell of the diesel stove was a bit revolting and so was the cook. There was no air down here, and it took my eyes a bit of time to adjust. The cook was smiling like a loon with a wooden spoon in his hand. I had to get up. The ladder was swaying with the waves. I popped the hatch open. I came up from below decks, and the freezing Arctic air was like a breath of new life in my lungs. It was just twilight and the men were hauling on the lines we were attacking. I watched the sinking sun swing from starboard to port as the bow passed through the wind. The sails caught and the ship felt like it was in the firm grip of some great wind. God! You there? Me? You think you're on a pleasure cruise? Get up to the crow's nest. You'll keep watch till midnight. I climbed up the rigging until I got to the little basket on the mast. Way up high. There was a place for me to hang my legs. It seemed like I was swaying much more than the ship below for some reason. I wasn't scared, but I don't think I'd ever been up so high. The sun dipped, but again never quite touched the horizon. The helmsman navigated a path through the icebergs along the coast of some rocky, uninhabited island. I knew I was watching for the green glow of whales. The harpooner was curled up near the bow, snoozing away but awaiting my cry of whale. But the cry never came that night. Nor did it come the next night. Or the one after that. The days were long and exhausting. None of the sailors spoke much. No one questioned my uncanny appearance. They knew I wasn't one of them. They spoke only enough to instruct me. I learned the ropes, so to speak. Even though we sailors know it's only a rope if it has no purpose. Otherwise, it's a line. I learned about jibs and jiving mainsail and heads in the freezing wind up in the crow's nest. I almost forgot myself. I sang to distract myself and rubbed my bluish fingers. I hurried down below. When my shift was over, I woke the man that I shared a bunk with. He went off to his duties and I was glad for the warmth he left in the sweaty sheets. We ate moldy old bread and drank a glass of rum every day. Not once, though, did we see so much as a regular old whale. Never mind the great green fish we saw at. I could see day by day. Desperation and widening eyes on the sailor's faces. Every man knew there was a creeping madness on the ship. Small now but growing. We all saw the possible future. Our sheets to the wind. The ship stuck in the ice. Madness. Starvation. Scuffles among the weakened men. For the bit of flesh. Still clinging to a dead comrade's ankle bone. The captain tried to hide the wound festering behind his eyes in his blighted mind. But we all saw it as clear as if it were a bleeding stump at the end of his arm. He couldn't lead us much longer. He couldn't hold this cursed crew together. We were all unutterably alone in the frozen waters. I sat watching the sun as it sank and sank into the Arctic fog like an ugly eye mocking me. I looked into the baleful ocean that refused to surrender its secrets to us. We were a pinprick on the vast canvas, and the sun and the sea and rocks knew that before long there'd be no trace of us above the waves. Overawed by despair, I drifted off to sleep and mercifully, I woke in the familiar old closet of the Department of Lactic Affairs experimental labs. I was groggy. I stumbled out. There was the screwdriver, a panel removed from the escalator. The door I had firmly locked was open. Stormy was gone. I ran into the hallway, empty. I ran downstairs and out the

door. It was dark. A milkman made his way across the path. I ran to him. What time is it? About nine or so. I was going to be late for my shift. I ran and ran out through the gate and all the way to the subway. I would just barely make it. Stormy must have gone home. I was just on time. I saw Joseph standing there. I ran alongside the station. Nobili on the wall here. Just a picture of a bottle. And the old slogan. Creamy white. Cleanliness as our habit. I thought about telling Joseph what had happened. I'd never had a spell last days. Or was it weeks? I decided I would tell him some other day. We dropped off the bottles in the annex, and it was as unsettling as the first time. It never got easier. I really thought I'd only be doing this for a few days, but it looks like this was my lot for at least a while. I had gone to see Stan, but if I do night shifts, I'll miss the Friday night experiment. It won't work. It's not for me to interfere with how Dwyer runs his station. And the solution is simple. We'll do the experiments Saturday night instead. I was dumbfounded. Stormi wasn't going to like that at all. Listen, sir, there's something else. I thought I saw you somewhere. Possibly. I'm very busy. Howie, I've got to be in a lot of different places at once. Anyways, we got to the dead end where the houses were stacked on top of each other. The little wood carvings of little oval men. Maybe we can take turns. You try the door and I pick you up, and then I pick you up and you try the door. Okay, so it's your turn, then. He stared at me with those big eyes. Got out and grabbed the milk. I could hear the bottles clattering in his shaky hands. Poor guy. I can't. Howie, please, can you do it? Fine. I walked up. The sooty air was still thin. I took out the bit of wire and moving slowly like I was under water. I tried to unlock the door. The muttering was everywhere. And again I blacked out into the feathers of a blackbird. I fucking can. I got off the mattress and Joey arrived just as I got to the end of the alley. Did you ever ask Dwyer what we're supposed to do? No. We can't. Why not? We just can't. At least I got to look out the window again on the drive home. Left on Gorton grass. Right on Meragi. Make Joe. Good night. Howard. I like Joseph. Finally, someone I could really talk to. I open the door quietly since stormy was probably asleep. But she wasn't. She was sitting in a chair, facing me with a knife in her hand and a look of terror on her face. Oh, thank God it's you. What happened? It was your mother. She was banging on the door. What did she want? I don't know. I didn't open. She scares me. That was very strange. Maybe my mother had just gotten lost somewhere. Then I asked stormy what had happened at the laboratory. Oh, you'll love this. I think I could have been a milkman. A lab guy came in and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was your girlfriend and that you were showing me around. I went to the ladies room, and when I came out, I couldn't find you, so I just wandered in there. I don't think he noticed the screwdriver. And I didn't tell him you were in the closet. Some guy named Herman drove me home. I gave her a big hug. You're amazing. Stormy. We're quite a team. So no harm, no foul. The rest of the week went on as usual. I did convince Joseph to give the house a try, and he vanished into the mist. No. And of course I forgot to ask him for directions at first, so I didn't know where to go. I just drove back to the station. No point searching all over the east End. He was pretty miffed next time I saw him, but he could have remembered that. He never told me where to go. But I did tell you three times on the way back. You weren't listening. Stormy was annoyed, too, with the night shift. But we made the best of it. We didn't see much of each other. I'd come home and pass out. I'd wake up in time for us to have a late lunch together and maybe spend some of the afternoon together. But I didn't sleep that well in the daytime, so I was groggy a lot of the time. I tried my best to be cheerful, though. I was really beginning to understand just how lucky I was. Then on Saturday night, I showed up. For what? For all I knew could have been a six month journey through the ice. The scientist told me that Stan wanted to see me right away. I had a sinking feeling as I climbed up the ladder to his office. Was I in trouble? Howie, nice to see you. How goes the research? Oh, fine. I haven't found anything yet, but I think I spent a few weeks on the ship. The Alice may. She's a fine vessel. I've spent my fair share of time on her. I'm sure

you'll find something soon. And I gather you've been trying to get in touch with the librarian. He should have some good advice if you can reach him. How did you. I wasn't trying. As I told you last time, Howie, I have to be in many places at once. But that's not why we're here today. I wanted to ask you, Howie. Why don't you tell me about your friend stormy? Oh, she is wonderful. The best thing that's ever happened to me. That's very nice, Howie. And how well do you know her? I've known her now for over a year. Does she have any particular political leanings? Oh, no. She's more like her dad. Very practical. Not political at all. She takes care of all the finances. She's good with machines. In fact, she just fixed Professor Lemmy's toaster the other day. A real whiz. She picked that up from her father. Why don't you tell me about her father, Mr. Greenwood? He was a tinker. You didn't hear about him? There was some kind of mix up on Saint Gauss, and he ended up being shot by the police. I see. And what was this mix up? Oh, they thought he was a subversive, that he was trying to interfere with the thermal laser, but I'm sure he wasn't. He was really a nice man. I mean, I saw him taking pictures of the thermal laser once through the windows of the milk station, and for some reason, he was convinced it had nothing to do with milk. But I explained it all to him, and he was completely fine. Stan was really paying attention to me now. Stormy must have been upset when he was killed. Of course. But we talked about it. That's part of the reason she wanted to come here. Fresh start, you know. He shifted in his seat, and I was starting to wonder what this was all about. Do I have to do the experiment still tonight? We can skip it for tonight, Howie. But I wanted to ask you about one last thing. It has come to my attention that something is wrong with the escalator. Do you happen to know anything about that? No, I don't. It is also coming to my attention that stormy was found wandering around the campus. In fact, she was found in the laboratory where the escalator is. It was time for some of my quick thinking. Oh, right. It's a funny thing, actually. What happened? I remember that night I'd gone out to church, actually, to see Father Abraxas. Maybe you know him. And I completely forgot to tell stormy where I was going. And she told me afterwards that she got worried and thought I was here. So she came out and was looking around for me. That's when they found her. So she came here without your knowledge? Oh, absolutely. And she didn't mention anything about interfering with a corrupt escalator? No, sir. Not at all. She said she'd come with you. She'd gone to the ladies room and then couldn't find you. Oh. That's strange. I'm sure she was just confused. She probably didn't want to say that she'd come alone, because then the milkman would have been suspicious. You know how we're always on the lookout for subversives? She just didn't know any better. Okay, Howie, that will be all for now. Wow. I just got a note of that by the skin of my teeth. I made up my mind not to tell stormy about it. I didn't want to worry her, and I think I'd calmed Stan about any worries he might have had. I went to see Father Abraxas Sunday night. We were going to discuss my case. I thought it was going to be a lot of complicated legal stuff, but it wasn't. And when do you think you started having this problem with being a seeker? Oh, I don't know. I want you to try hard to remember the very first incident. It could be very helpful. What happened right before. I'll try to think about it. Good. Perhaps we can argue that the demonic possession was the real cause of these unfortunate events. There have been cases of a demon by locating. Perhaps he took control of your father as well. Maybe. Father, I'm not sure. Tell me more about your father, Harry. What do you want to know? Do you have any good memories of him? Oh, sure. I think my earliest memory was of him chasing me around the house. I was hiding, I remember his laugh and his smile. I remember dancing around in our living room and my mom and dad were on the couch. I love that they were watching me. That's good. Howie. Very good. Human beings are rarely entirely good or bad. You didn't hate your father, did you? There were good memories as well as bad. That's right. That's just how it was. After all, who is a man? Truly? The man he is at his best or at his worst? Who was the real Saint? Fleming? The one who fed ice cream to puppies. Or the one who called

fire down on the town of Rossmore. And when they refused to pay their milk tab. Very true father. What we want to do is focus the judges attention on that one memory, that one glimpse into your relationship. There are times, my son, when one memory tells a truth that a whole lifetime conceals. I walked home that night through a quiet snowfall. Not usual for this time of year. It was cold, but the cold brought me back to myself. Made me feel alive. The way the beginning of fall always does. With the closeness of a death that always seemed so far off. And I kept going through that memory over and over again. That man who wanted nothing to do with me by the end, chasing me and laughing. That moment seemed to be enough for both of us. Was it me or him that changed? Did I become so repugnant that he just couldn't stand me anymore? Did something happen to him? I was a kid, after all. And kids change all the time. Adults just stay the same. So it must have been me. But now, walking through the snow in this city that was my city. With its smokestacks and its bombs and its paths that only I knew. I didn't have a lot to call my own. But the city was mine. It wouldn't ever turn on me. When I run away. As a kid, I always felt like the stinking pavements and the rundown banks and coffee shops knew me in a way that no one else ever would. I'd be okay on the sidewalk, but then I had nowhere to stay. Really. As a kid, I never thought I'd have my own little piece of the city. To tell you the truth, I always just figured I'd end up sleeping on the streets here and being one of those bums. Their smell repulsed me. But then I lingered. Maybe that would be me one day. And maybe that would have been okay. But now I had my own place. I had my girl. I was safe. The cold didn't bother me because I knew that I could go into a place that was warm, with a woman who love me and who I would do everything to protect. I opened my own door and walked inside, and there was stormy with a big smile. Bigger than normal. I completely forgot it was your birthday. I've been putting a bit of money away. Come on. And she led me into the kitchen and there on the kitchen table as tears filled my eyes, was a brand new battery powered radio. [00:00:01]/[0.0]

CETOLOGY

Welcome back to the Milkman of St. Gaff's

I'd like to thank some new patrons -

Todd Van Voris, Fly Sprayer

Peter Kubiak - Fly Sprayer

Kerry Bouchard - Milkman White Badge -

And a big shoutout to our new DOLA Radio Clerk - Martina Don Vita -

Thank you all so much for your continued support!

Also - just to let you know where we're going - this season - the podcast will end at episode 42.

This episode, number 37, is called - Cetology.

[Start with radio static - from the Short Wave?]

The men hardly ever spoke with me. I never really figured out why. We had a job to do, and I had a key role to play. They told me what I had to do, but that's all they told me. I sat off to the side listening to them joking around with each other - the black, fishy smelling smoke rose like ugly crooked fingers, clawing at the arctic sky. We'd come ashore on rowboats to harvest the oil. The ship sat in the bay, just a black silhouette against the ice and sea.

We'd taken down a whale. Not a Falena, mind you, but there was still some value in ordinary whale oil for these men. So we'd cut out long strips of fat from the whale carcass and boiled them in huge iron vats - they threw blubber on the fire to keep it hot and to keep it going - firewood being scarce here.

We despaired of ever finding a falena - the hopelessness cast a pall over the sailors. Even their laughter sounded small and hollow in the huge empty landscape.

And if ever we did find one, considering the trouble we'd had with this whale, it wasn't certain we'd be able to bring down a much bigger fish. An ordinary falena, I heard them say, was easily twice as big as this one.

I sat on one of the boxes we'd hauled out...in the cool sunlight watching the fire, I dozed...

I don't know how long I'd been out here...but my thoughts, as always, went back to home and to Stormy.

I was thrilled to finally have a radio. When we turned it on, though, we didn't hear a thing. I turned the dial all the way left and all the way right - nothing - moved the antenna around. Just static.

Then Stormy noticed that the electricity was out - the electric lights weren't working. ...the radio had batteries but the radio station couldn't broadcast anything.

We cursed our rotten luck - but I didn't get upset. We just decided to go out for a walk like we usually did.

We just talked about this and that...got a hot dog on the boardwalk and ended all the way down by the little amusement park way out at the eastern edge of the east end. It was closed for the season, but I told Stormy what it was like -

"There were races...donkey rides...tight rope walkers

"you could actually get a steam ferry from the dock downtown that would take you across to here...they had snacks on board and iced slush drinks - I really miss that."

"Your parents used to take you?"

"No, I never went to the park - i never took the ferry either,"

"So why did you say you missed it?"

"I guess I meant...I missed that I didn't ever get to go. Other kids told me about it, so it almost seems like a memory...you know?"

"I guess...I don't know if you can miss something you never had..."

That thought really stuck with me...I didn't say anything...but it seemed to me that I missed a lot of things I never had.

Walking through the east end with Stormy was a nice moment I'd never forget. But a sailor nudged me awake - the sky was darker now - there was a reddish glow on the mountains. The fires were going out and they'd decided I had to go back and get more bundles of wood from below decks. They figured I was young and nimble so I'd be able to get the wood before the fire went out.

[you think you're gonna just sit on your arse all day napping?]

I rowed out...watching the men get smaller...until they were just little matchsticks on the shore...

I tied up the rowboat - I'd become quite an accomplished sailor myself by this point and tying knots was no problem at all. I climbed up - I had the whole ship to myself. For a moment I stood there watching the sinking sun - I could pull up the anchor right now by myself - - I'd search for the Falena myself, alone - I looked back at the little dots of men on the shore and the smoke...

If the fire did go out, I could always just leave them there and sail off, over the dark broad seas...to find a new world over the horizon like some hero king of old.

I'd sail beyond the sunset, and just keep going beneath the jealous stars until I sail right over the edge...

Then I froze - I wasn't alone on the ship - there was whispering... "The early bird gets the worm"

I heard rustling below decks - where the wood was.

Maybe I'd just row back ashore and tell the sailors there wasn't any wood after all. But they'd probably figure out that I was lying when they got back to the ship.

Maybe I could just row out to sea and hope this would all end and that I'd be home before I starved to death.

I was a milkman, though, in a line of brave milkmen like Corwin and Frank and Beaver. I told myself that whatever was down there, I could handle. So I opened the hatch, and made my way down...down...I took the ladder backwards so I wouldn't have my back to whatever was down there....something flew at me and I fell most of the way down -

It was flapping and terrified - I could see by its black eye - a blackbird was trapped down here and panicked. Somehow it couldn't find the open hatch...it was bigger than normal and it smelled musty -

It flew right into my chest - wings flapping...I tried pushing the disgusting thing off me - but it kept pushing into me - it's little feet clawing at me - the eye terrified. One last push and it was gone - I clambered up the ladder, looking up to the dimming sky... but the bird flew up behind me, I could feel its wings...all around me as I climbed up out of the sewer in front of the church of St. Flemming. It must have been just before dawn, since it was quiet...the bums weren't making much noise - there was just one digging around a trash can. I stood and marveled at the glowing stained glass...the church was just about the only nice building in the east end these days...

I was exhausted and hungry and annoyed that I still hadn't gotten any phlogesterion. There was nothing to do, though, but to start walking home.

"Excuse me - what day is it?"

"It's your uncle's birthday - take off"

Wow - the hobos are a lot ruder than they used to be...

As I got into the nicer part of town, I noticed that they been replacing the gas lamps with electric lights - they looked dim and cold = I guess that was the future, though. I asked someone there what day it was and they said Wednesday. So I'd been gone a few days...and luckily I still had a few days before I had to do another experiment.

Finally I was home...

"Stormy? Hello?"

I guessed she was out somewhere....how strange...but there was a bunch of mail addressed to Stormy...I looked through it all.

“Huh. Fourteen cheques from the patent office and a bunch of gobbledygook. I guess this one can go in the stove.”

I went upstairs to bed...and I was dreaming before I even fell asleep...

The door opened downstairs -

“Stormy?”

“Howie! Where have you been?”

I ran down to see her - she was wearing strange clothes...

“The experiment lasted longer this time...where were you? What are you wearing?”

“I got a job as a checkout girl at the market. I didn’t know if you were coming back or what. I went to the milk station and Dwyer said he couldn’t tell me anything and that it was all top secret...”

Stormy told me all about her new job and how hard it was to memorize all the different prices of all the different fruits and melons and everything. I could see that from now on I was going to be hearing all about her coworkers and the customers...it was a bit frightening...I was trying to find a way to change the subject...

“Oh - I almost forgot - there’s mail for you. A bunch of cheques - maybe you won’t need that job afterall.”

She looked through the pile of checks from the patent office and started crying silently. I could tell it was going to be a long day. I felt bad for Stormy, though.

“There there...at least you have something nice to remember about your father”

Stormy was pretty upset and I couldn't get back to sleep, so I decided to go see Father Abraxes all the way back in the east end. I took a streetcar this time, though.

I'd been meeting with him when I could - he understood that my schedule was a bit up in the air...he'd made a bunch of plans. He really wanted to stick it to the Tertulians who were going to be prosecuting me. I was amazed at his brilliant legal mind - we were going to have surprise character witnesses, arcane exegesis on the great whaler's conception of eschatology...I couldn't wait. The trial was going to happen any day now. Since he was my lawyer he was going to get a notice from the cosmoecclesiastical Telegraph company, and then we'd have to appear in court the next night. He'd already been granted a motion to have the case heard in night court since I was usually pretty sleepy in the daytime.

Speaking of the night - when I showed up for my shift that night at the milk station, Joseph was standing there with his arms crossed.

“And where have you been?”

“The experiment lasted longer than usual.”

“I had to walk home by myself every night since you've been gone.”

“I'm sorry, buddy...it can't be helped. I'll tell you what - I'll go to the librarian's house the rest of the week okay?”

“Okay...”

“Hey - Joey - I wouldn’t leave you hanging, okay? We’re buddies forever!”

He perked up a bit when I said that. I could tell he felt a bit lonely...like he wasn’t quite the same as the rest of the millkmen.

It was almost good to be back in the Annex - I missed the coast road on St. Gaff’s, but in the end, it was better to deliver milk with a partner. And I felt a strange affinity with all the weirdos here...the only really bad part was how the shift always ended. I racked my mind trying to figure out a way to pick the lock on the librarian’s door...but I ‘d run out of ideas...tonight, when I got to his door and was feeling pretty lightheaded from the mist...I realized that Joe hadn’t given me a paperclip for the lock...So I took a chance and just turned the knob - I almost fainted when it turned in my hand...I pushed the door and it opened..

Inside, the place was all black and it was hard to see...there were some lit candles that didn’t give off much light...dusty old bookshelves everywhere...dusty stuffed black birds...and a dusty old man who was laughing at me...

Panic took hold of me and I tried to run, but it’s like I was under water and couldn’t move - the librarian just laughed more...

“Don’t judge a book by it’s cover, Howie...”

I turned to the old man- he still sat...

“How do you know my name?”

“You’re out there almost every night trying to deliver my milk - which you could have just left on the step, by the way - I can hear you two knuckleheads talking out there.”

Then he sneezed - a cloud of dust kicked up around him, and I watched in horror as he ripped a page out of a book that was beside him - he blew his nose and wiped all the snot away with the page, then crumpled it up and threw it on the floor...

“Don’t look so aghast, son...no one wants to read this one.”

On the floor - there were a whole bunch of crumpled up papers...

“Well, now that we’ve delivered your milk, I’ll be on my way.”

I was walking off - but he was cackling.

“I know what it is you seek, young man. I’m the only one who knows any more how to get what you need.”

I turned -

“That’s not true - there are others - Travis knows —”

“Travis is a well-meaning old fool. Has he ever caught a falena? Ever brought back a drop of the liquid? No. He just sits and stares out to sea wishing he lived in some other time and place.”

“And what about you? You just sit here forever sneezing into your old books?”

“I don’t claim to be a Seeker - but I know what all the Seekers have forgotten. Did Travis ever tell you how to acquire the liquid? I didn’t think so. A cricket bowler could have all the potential in the world - but that doesn’t mean he can figure it all out on his own. You sit a while - in two or three nights I’ll make you into the holiest diver of this generation.”

“Diver?”

[he just chuckles]

That night, I sat at the foot of the librarian, brushing aside the boogery pages, and I imbibed the wisdom of one who truly knows. He instructed me in the means and methods of acquiring the sacred juice.

I left his place walking on a cloud - of dusty black mist, only to discover that Joe was gone. I cursed my ill manners - I should have told him what was going on. I'm sure he thought I just vanished and was waiting on the mattress...I'm sure the little guy would forgive me anyways.

When I got home I was totally ecstatic - I finally knew what had to be done. Stormy had all that money coming in, and soon I'd have the phlogestron and I'd probably be hailed as a hero for helping to create the special gasses that were going to subdue our eternal foe to the north.

When I woke up the next evening, Stormy was there. She'd had a long day and

"everyone was complaining about how poor the pumpkins are this time of year - but I didn't pick them."

"That's terrible, sweetie. Listen - There's some very good news coming pretty quickly. I want to celebrate! Let's go to that place on Fine st. where they serve those beef wellingtons! We can even try some red wine like the fancy folks do. I heard professor Lamy say that beef wellington and red wine is the best food anyone can get!"

"We can't afford to go out for dinner!"

"Why not? What about all those cheques from your dad?"

"I put the money aside. I opened a bank account and we're going to put the patent money in there and live on your salary. We have to start saving for the future, you know."

It's a funny thing because I never really thought of myself as someone with a future. There were lots of dreams of the future - raising rabbits in the backwoods of St. Gaff's with Stormy...but I always sort of knew that they weren't real possibilities. Realistically, I always thought I'd rise through the ranks to become a middling milkman and have a moderately exciting career...Stormy would go off and marry someone else and I'd marry some regular other girl who would never understand why I always looked out the bedroom windows at night - pining for the one who got away.

But instead I had her right here in front of me and I could grab her bum whenever I wanted. I really was a lucky guy.

"Well I think I should get a say about that money too - and I say we go for beef wellingtons!"

"Howie - no! I'm serious. With that money, it's like my dad is still taking care of me."

"Stormy, I knew your dad - almost as well as you did. And believe me - he'd smile at the idea that his girl was using that money to go out and have a great time at a nice restaurant."

She thought about this a moment and I could tell I'd hit a nerve. I just needed a final push -

"No dishes! You can wear some of the nice clothes you never wear!"

And just like that, we were ordering ourselves yorkshire puddings and a second bottle of southern wine.

I knew what to do in a place like this after going to the steakhouse with Lamy a few times and I could tell Stormy was impressed with all my refinements. Who says a milkman can't have class?

We loved having someone serve us dinner - we were pretty tipsy and we started giggling and we didn't even care that the stuffed shirts were staring at us...and then she was crying thinking about her poor old dad...

“I wish he could have been here with us”

And really, she was right...I missed him too to tell the truth...

We walked back wobbly and happy...And I realized - I was supposed to be at work already!

I had to just leave Stormy to walk the rest of the way home on her own and I took off for the milk station.

“Joe, Joe - I’m so sorry - And about last night”

“You’re sorry? You stink like a wino, Howie.”

“I had some drinks - it was the wife’s birthday!”

I figured he couldn’t stay mad after I said that - and I was right.

“And I didn’t take off last night - I actually got in! The librarian told me all about what I need to do - he’s really not such a bad guy once you get past the boogers and dust.”

“I guess you’re right Howie - it was a great night after all. I’m really glad we got to be friends.”

And then one of the strangest things happened - Dwyer was blabbering at me from behind. I turned around.

“Alright Howie - we’re putting you back on days for a while - Geoffrey’s gonna go back to nights.”

“You mean Joseph? I thought maybe we could be partners all the time.”

“Joseph? No Geoffrey - the guy who was doing nights before you.”

“But what about Joseph? Is he going back on days, too?”

“Why the hell do you keep talking about Joseph? What Joseph?”

“Joseph the other milkman who did night shifts with me?”

Dwyer just stared - “You’re bloody weird Howie.”

And just like that, the peckerhead turned and walked away again.

The whole thing left me with a sort of spooky feeling. But I just went home to Stormy’s drunken snoring and passed out.

Stormy of course, doesn’t normally snore...I made a mental note to not let her drink so much in the future...

The next day on my normal boring old route, I was sad as hell that I was alone in the truck. I missed the strange little guy...

But we milkmen have to have a stiff upper lip..so I grinned and bared it. Anyways, I could hardly stop thinking about what I was going to do once I was back on the ship...

And sure enough, when Saturday night came around, I found myself on the deck of the black sailed ship. To my horror, I realized we were southbound.

“The season’s changed, son. We’ll not be caught around these shores when the witch of November comes.”

“But I know - I know how to get the phlogisterion!”

“It’ll have to wait till spring. We’ve stayed here too long already.”

So south we went. The air was colder. I found myself below decks more often than not, trying to stay warm by the oven and the stinking cook. Above decks, I watched the sea mournfully - just when everything I wanted was right within my grasp, I slipped right through all of my fingers. I thought about asserting myself - weren’t we all here mostly for me to perform my duty? I was just screwing up enough courage to face off against our captain when there was a tattle tale sound in the rigging - the ship pitched the port all of a sudden and cold wind hit like a bomb.

“She’s come early this year, mates”

Waves broke right over the decks and I had to hold tight to the railing so as not to get pitched into the sea...

“The witches squall - everyone get below!”

The sailors pulled down the sheets as fast as they could, then struggled to the hatch.

I just stood with my hands gripped on the rail - transfixed by the green glow right alongside the ship.

It was snowing now -

“Howie - GET BELOW”

But I knew what I had to do. I pulled out my milkman’s knife, my milk bottle, took a deep breath and dove into the stabbing cold water -

My skin was burning with cold and my eyes burned from salt. There were only a few seconds before I'd have to breath or before my limbs stopped.

The sea was lit up with the massive falena -

- it was probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, and the great fish was just a blur, but I pushed with everything I had and found the underside - I felt around - like the librarian told me too, until I found the inward facing teat - and I plunged my knife into the Falena's side - there was a horrific cry - but there was also an explosion of white liquid - I gasped a bit and swallowed some of the fishy liquid - I filled my bottle as best I could - put the cap on.

The Falena had pulled me down some - I swam up to the surface...and saw for the first time - there were two falena - one much smaller than the other...

The last thing I saw before getting to the top was that big falena on her side floating down, the light flickering. The small falena followed the big one down on its downward drift...

I couldn't believe it - I was back in Mingsbight and for once, not too far from home...I was shivering and exhausted. But I felt the still warmish bottle of phlogesterion in my pocket. Stormy was asleep - I just put the bottle on the counter and went to sleep...I didn't dream for once...

When I awoke - Stormy was just getting ready to go to work -

"How was the experiment?"

"Fantastic! I did it! I got the liquid! But - the bottle - it's empty!?"

"That bottle of fishy milk? I poured it out! It was bad, Howie."

I won't tell you what happened next because it wasn't one of my finest moments...I was mad. I'll admit it. I probably yelled and screamed...of course in hindsight, I realize I shouldn't have gotten so mad.

Eventually I calmed down and went all the way to the grocer where Stormy worked so I could explain to her boss that she was late because of official milkman business.

I spent the rest of the afternoon just trying to calm myself down - I told myself that I'd done it once, I could do it again. Where there's one Falena, there must be more...that flickering downward drift kept bothering me in the back of my mind...but I tried to convince myself not to worry.

The other little voice that kept yammering at me said that maybe the librarian wasn't really on my side like he said he was...

It was Sunday now and Stan said he'd pick me up in his car around 8. So I stood outside around 7:30 - Stan would know what to do of course. I went out early, like I said and then, whenever I neighbour asked me what I was doing out there, I said, loud and clear, that the head of the department of lactic affairs was picking me up. I don't think anyone believed me. And, very annoyingly, when the shiny black car came around the corner and stopped in front of my house, no one was around. The driver got out, came around the opened the door for me. But I jst stood there for a minute hoping someone would see me -

"Howie - get in here!"

So in I got, and the big motor revved and off we went. Driving through Mingsbight in style - red velvety upholstery - nice and soft.

"I had it, Mr. Stan. It was there - in my hand."

"And? What happened?"

"Stormy poured it out!"

He turned and looked hard at me.

“Stormy”

“Yes! She knew I was trying to get the phlogesterion - - I mean - I didn’t tell her what for or anything, of course - just that I had to acquire a certain liquid - I hope that’s okay...she’s my girl, I can’t completely keep her in the dark,.....haha...so she knew I needed this liquid – and without even asking, she pours it all down the drain! I was asleep - I was exhausted from diving into the ocean and it was freezing...”

“Stormy knew you were looking for phlogesterion, and then she poured it down the drain?”

“I know! What was she thinking!”

He settled back into his seat, looking pretty miffed.

“The other thing - the librarian. He told me how to get the liquid - is it right that falena feed oil to their babies? Is it usually white?”

“What?”

“I wonder sometimes if the librarian maybe isn’t on our side, you know? Maybe we need to pay him a visit - if you know what I mean.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“To tell you the truth, I think he might be positively evil.”

“Evil? There’s no such thing as evil, Howie. My mission here is in large part to rid human beings of those superstitions. We have science, Howie - it can explain everything in time. It can make life better -

improve our quality of life. The way we've rationalized milk delivery and purification, for example. This leads to a better life for everyone. Out project with the crepusculator - it will bring a swift and complete end to the war. Again - bettering the lives of everyone. Talk of evil only stunts progress. Better to strike that word from your vocabulary. We will pay the librarian a visit. In fact, your old colleague Frank is being transferred here. You can he can visit him. The librarian may not have been entirely truthful, or he was obfuscating...either way, we will deal with him rationally - and we will discover the truth."

This was really the life - driving around in the back of a big black car, talking politics and philosophy with an honest to goodness big shot. I felt like I'd really made it now.

Stan had very graciously agreed to go see Father Abraxes with me. Stan was going to testify at my trial about how important I was - so that's where we were going now. We didn't get to talk too much more since we'd arrived at the church. The driver opened the doors for us and we got out.

But we didn't go in.

We just stood outside the Cathedral of Saint Flemming not saying a word - The stained glass windows were dark - the whale bones had all gone out.

OU

Stormy pours it out.

Howie goes to the Church to meet with the preacher - Stan walks with him - he's going to intercede on his behalf - it's NIGHT COURT -

On the walk, the town has a weird vibe - he tells Stan about Stormy pouring out the milk...

STAN - Howie says that the librarian seems...evil...Stan sighs - one of my missions here has been to rid people of these superstitions - there is no such thing as evil, Howie - then he talks about the gas - a means to bring peace...

The whale bones in the church have all gone out.

38 The Man from Elkhorn

this is episode thirty eight of the milkman of St gaffes and absurdist horror podcast today I'd like to thank some new patrons we have lavender quartz fly sprayer Onie apprentice and Valerie the beautiful milkman white badge thank you very much for your support you can visit how email command dot com to learn more about how to support the show and this episode is called the man from Alcorn it's time for the milkman of saying gas starring hi we did anything unusual happen during our last experiment no %HESITATION any idea why the whale bones have gone dark no more these blasted whales continue to interfere with the order of things and Stan was right shortly after we got out of the car it started raining and it didn't stop raining for a long long time we went into the church what's wrong this stand nodded some villainy of nature there was some candles burning in the church but it was gloomy and dark without the gentle glow of the whale bones you couldn't see the ceiling at all seen Fleming look like a ghoul now and every depiction can we still prepare for the trial yes I sent a boy to inquire if the bones have been extinguished everywhere or just here but I understand that you're a busy man Mr stand that this shouldn't take long and so under the morose glare of saying Fleming's now strangely menacing countenance we plotted a course meant to rescue me from a fate I could very well have woven myself not that I ever admitted that to anybody it was the dog %HESITATION just leave that am I trying to get it off but I was just a boy back then the next little while things went on sort of as usual I delivered the milk by myself sometimes I thought I saw a little Joey standing under an awning somewhere but it was never him stormy and I were both happy that I was back on days she got her manager to letter just work morning shifts so

we have the afternoons to ourselves it wasn't really the honeymoon phase anymore in the initial phase from the time when we met until now we were just a couple of lovestruck lovebirds who couldn't get enough of each other but now that we've gotten into a routine I began to appreciate her on a whole new level we were growing together and figuring out what true love really meant we would take long walks and slowly but surely stormy felt she could open up to me of course we always had to bring our umbrellas with us since it never stopped raining she told me all about how much her dad meant to her and how hard it was that he'd gotten caught up in all that political intrigue but now we were more or less a normal couple making our way and making plans for the future that we hardly even dared to speak about to each other and there were a lot of earthquakes that damaged a lot of buildings and rumors of a weird creatures wasting themselves up out of the holes thank goodness our house was fine we fought off the gloom by holding hands and walking close to each other and when we'd come home we'd get into warm clothes and make warm tea and sit on the couch and listen to the radio which finally we've gotten working a few times my mom would show up and throw rocks at the windows or hit the walls with the stick it terrified stormy and I was perplexed figuring she was losing her marbles in her senility but I always chased her away which stormy really appreciated she can't hurt you now my love it was around this time that we heard that a man from Alcorn had shown up to investigate the strange goings on the constant rain the monsters and I even saw him once coming out of the church when I was going in father Abraxas told me the man wanted to see for himself if the whale bones had really gone out sometimes I walked at night after stormy fell asleep and I looked for the annex I tried to remember all the impossible turns Joseph made but I could never find the place again stand decided that there was no point in continuing the experiments since obviously something quite serious had happened in the other place and he wanted to know what it was the other reason he didn't think it was necessary for me to go on was as I told you last time Frank was coming back here to Ming's by of course Frank was from here and I thought he really liked the clean country living on St gaffes because there wasn't so much substance abuse are fighting there but I guess he really wanted to come back because he'd taken it into his head to find some flood just steering in on his own I was actually tasked with going down to the docks in meeting his fairy I have to tell you that I was pretty miffed when I saw that he didn't have just a milk bottle full of the stuff he was pushing a Dolly with a whole milk canister full I was jealous as hell Frank how you doing buddy great you are missing the big city oh no nothing like that just doing my duty as a milkman is that thing really full of flood just year him for sure Hey you didn't think you were the only speaker milk man did you and he winked at me but where did you get it you got it from a Selena Hey how E. O. and I are buds for sure but really this is kind of a matter of professional advancement so I kind of got to keep it to myself you understand right %HESITATION of course in another time and place I would have sick the dog right at his annoying froze but I grinned impaired it as usual always trying to be the people pleaser I went with him all the way to the department of lactic affairs experimental labs and they showed Frank the ladder and climbed up behind him Frank you really are our savior a small still voice in the midst of a sea of incompetence I see that victory is now within our grasp I couldn't help but take that personally how E. show Frank the crepuscular later at once but I didn't because as fate would have it right at that moment a junior priest ran in how we Coxwell your trial begins tonight and that set off a whole flurry of activity we took a procession of river boats up the river Kiersten at sundown it was slow going and there were a lot of us they were all in roads maybe to keep the rain off or maybe because the trial was a religious thing I didn't know who all the people were because they were covered up by the roads everyone but me I was in my uniform which was not very thick and it was getting pretty wet already I shivered in the cold maybe it was just cold but maybe I was afraid I was on trial for my life and to be totally honest I didn't feel like a new father

Abraxas or stand well enough to really depend on them I wish I had Mr Corwin or someone there with me I tried hard to think back about what happened that night so long ago that I was on trial for now but all I could think about was how stormy would be on her own tonight and how much she would have enjoyed the evening boat ride we pull the boats often some old guy tied them to the dock we lit torches and were led up a path to a place called panics hill while we were walking someone jabbed me in the back with something I turned around just a bunch of faceless people in robes no one said a thing who could have been we kept going up the hill on top it was drizzling and the hill was high and exposed to the wind there was a big circular area covered in stone the hell with sort of bear and with a few really old ash trees here and there you could see the lights of Ming's bite down below the legal clerks arranged us and someone poke me again from behind Hey who was that chance the clerk whispered you can't imagine how mad I was wasn't enough that I was on trial for murder but someone had to poke me like that and it wasn't even allowed to say anything about it after that I kept looking over my shoulder I felt very exposed and I wish I had a heavy rope like everyone else anyways we were all in a circle around the judge the judge was a stone god a statue from ancient times a four sided gray pillar with a bulbous head on top small frowning eyes and a frowning mouth intertwined hands were carved onto the front he was weathered and wise looking and he spoke through an interpreter who put her ear to his mouth to hear what he had to say the clerks set up torches all around someone somewhere rang a bell and I guess the trial started a man in crimson rose Wilson the head of the church who leans pulled his hood back so we could see his face she walked into the middle of the circle now to the judge and began his prosecution speech the circumstantial evidence in this case is incontrovertible how his father picked him up from jail and brought him home his mother as she will testify helped his father pack a bag for the young man as they both felt it was time for him to move on to other opportunities and then while his mother was baking how you one last goodbye apple pie she heard a kerfuffle outside and when she went to look how he was gone and her loving husband was dead cordon to pieces the key question here and how he was in the perpetrator who was it who else could have committed such a heinous deed the only possible answer is that it was the ungrateful and has we shall see how radical how he Coxwell avoid too bizarre for this world or the next your holiness the punishment should fit the crime how we Cox well it does not deserve to walk among us any longer he kept on going for a while talking about all the ways I wasn't a good follower of the great whaler and about how me thinking I was a speaker meant I was really a total apostate and that the church fathers had declared C. charism heresy long ago I was actually starting to drift off despite being cold and wet when yet again I felt a firm determined finger in the back of my read this I tried to elbow whoever was behind me but there wasn't anyone there I just felt totally helpless about the whole thing but then my defender father Abraxas pulled his hood back and went into the middle of a circle to give his apology how we Coxwell is a milkman all milk man a man who has sworn an oath to uphold the health and cleanliness of our populace he walks in the steps of countless mill command before him a lineage we can trace back all the way to our glorious savior how we Cox well is also human he has his faults he's made mistakes just as you and others have but I have met with how you lo these many days preparing for this trial and I say to you without blushing how is heart is as pure as any glass of milk you've ever tasted the glass may be modeled and speckled over with the doctor to serve a difficult upbringing but the interior deep down inside remains unblemished he had no wish to harm either of his parents he has striven in his way to be a dutiful son we will show over the course of the next two evenings that how he is simply not capable of the actions he is accused of here today after that there were a bunch of what Abraxas called personality witnesses it was sort of nice because I got to see a lot of my old friends from St gas even though I didn't get to talk to them I guess they'd all come over secretly on the ferry and so doctor Barrett as a doctor what

is your opinion of how he's mental defect the parts of his brain have become dissociated the pen doula is no longer attached to the lab Adam even large doses of ataxia and can't bring the parts back together again professor Lammy in your professional opinion how was how his relationship with his father how he thought that he and his mother and father were all in this together the things were tough but that they pull through together when he began to see that his parents but his father didn't see it that way it's like the ground beneath his feet gave way somehow he began to live in a very different world than you are I could you be more specific mmhm how he told me about a model ship he'd gotten from his father for his twelfth birthday he told me that he always regretted not being able to put it together with him he didn't know if he was too old to build it or if perhaps his father didn't really want to build it with him father we'll and wouldn't you say that how he demonstrates a total lack of cinder recess in his actions all I don't know he brought my lunch on time do you seem like a good boy come now father you must admit that he exhibits the direst symptoms of heresy while through among us isn't a little heretical sometimes mmhm the interpreter said the judge wanted to hear more from father we'll and about his opinions about heresy in his lunches I could tell the judge was giving me nasty looks what was that Mr grant heard I heard what the doctor and everyone said but it's none of it's true how is just an awful person it was quite a night and I did a lot of introspection on myself who knew that my old buddy granted thought I was an awful person that hurt but this was just the preliminary part of the trial tomorrow is going to be all about my mother and Stan was going to testify on my behalf we all filed back down the hill in the rain the horizon was glowing through the rainy gloom the moons on the green stars were nowhere to be seen the boat ride back was nice poking the river bottom with sticks to propel us along I nearly fell asleep except for another job in the back I was looking forward to collapsing into bed when I got home but of course the wire had put me back on days even though we work hard for nitrile so off I went to my rounds and when I came back nearly delirious with exhaustion to the station wire with his revolting fat lips told me I had to get to the experimental labs right away now I don't get to do a trial on time but you need to get over there now so off I went no dinner with stormy no way to even tell her where I was I was nodding off every which way when I got to the lab they told me to get to the crepuscular later which is where I went and then a perk right up at the sight of Frank pouring all sorts of flood your steering into the machine and smiling at me no really Frank where did you get it pretty amazing right but the crepuscular later still wasn't working properly perhaps Soto jealousy or perhaps out of a genuine desire to help I went over to the machine this thing can go a lot faster here I'll show you and I pushed a few important looking buttons but it didn't help in fact it almost seems like the machine was working worse it made a frightening noise and I stepped back accidentally knocking over the milk container full of sludge is scary and Frank freaked out and tried to save it by getting on his knees and trying to push the liquid around but there was a hole in the floor and all the stuff has flowed uselessly down there Frank stood up and like me who watched dumbfounded I thought he was going to flip his lead and attack me but he didn't he took a deep who responsible Braff and said well that's a pain but there's a lot more where that came from I can get more no problem how Hey professional secret bud but I'll do you a favor to stand stand stormed in he was shorter than Frank who is taller than me but still scary I heard the machine what's wrong with it where's the flood just Derian Frank gave me a magnanimous look and turn to the boss it wasn't how he Sir I knocked over the bucket and screwed up the machine but don't worry there's lots Dan had transformed into some horrible beast but I'd only seen in my dreams any was feasting on my old friend Frank I can't begin to tell you how awful this was I thought back about the drive up to the radio station is joking around when we took care of floor sham he'd always been there for me and now partly because of me this was happening to a fellow milkman ever since that moment I didn't fully trust Stan but just after that we were summoned the boats

were ready I don't know what do you think you saw how he but you clearly haven't slept for a long time sometimes the mind can play tricks on the vulnerable %HESITATION for sure Sir minimal and as luck would have it up on the windy raining hell they wanted me to testify again my own self there are questions about the activities of the milkman the milk man worships Satan don't pay I looked at stand he was frowning No Way I said I looked back at Stan and it was clear that I'd won some points then Abraxas question stand how he is a competent milkman you don't think he'd heard anyone do you I don't think so no then they brought my mother wrote and she pointed at me with her hateful finger you know what you did she has Wilson took up the questioning and I mother got all weepy when she talked about making one last hi for her little boy who is going out into the world to find his own way Mrs Cox well I think we all agree that it's every child's duty to make their parents happy would you say that how he has made you happy no and he didn't even attend his own father's funeral and she broke down into sobs now it was the turn of father Abraxas to take over he offer my mother a tissue but it was all wet because of the rain so she didn't even take it would you agree Mrs Cox well but how he has done quite well for himself since he left home he's gotten a highly respectable job I now understand that he'll be getting a red badge any day now no he has not done well and he is not a good milk man I'm on his route and he hasn't delivered the milk to me even once I stood up that's a damn lie you're not under my roof but the clerks hell be back in the interpreter showed that we had to be quiet I saw the devilish smile on my mother's been smoky lips father of praxis was flummoxed no further questions and then I was back on the stand how he did you really want to make that model with your father remember the judges watching I figured there was no point in lying no I thought I was too old to build it with him would you have made it with him if you'd been younger I would have but he never wanted to when I was younger how E. did you want your father dad no the interpreter looked at me his owner wishes to search your heart himself kneel before him there was a storm gathering above us it was getting darker as I looked at the piece of stone I knelt down and I swear I could hear him humming ruminating the interpreter leaned in the here with the judge said then we all held our breath as he read out the verdict later on the way down the hill I felt like the littlest piece of dirt but also like I could reach out and destroy the whole city beneath me I don't know if it was me or this guy but the ground was vibrating the air got dancing FEC and just like that a bolt of lightning exploded one of the crooked ancient trees it caught fire all of us ended up losing our way we were disoriented from the flash I felt like it was my fire I watched as the flames leapt from one tree to another even though it was raining more and more no one knew where they were going drifting all around me except to law clerks I think they thought I was trying to escape the two hooded figures ran out me in the flames in the hoods I can only run up the hill others were wandering aimlessly around us but I went straight to the middle of the court circle I came face to face with the miserable dog lit up in the fire I could see every side pock marked the years had given him and his head exploded the color cracked as the lightning smashed into his face an overall gas came up over the earth I thought I'd won but bits of debris flew out and one hit me in the head knocking it backwards into the dirt under the health crawling with bugs and add titles and the bones of every poor bastard that got executed on this hill because they couldn't make the lightning com I was pushing my way through looking for the way I would if I could gloat over the broken god just one time my evening would be complete hi Ryan does it happen again that finger but it wasn't a finger it was a stick poking me in the back like my old neighbors stick but it wasn't my neighbors stick it was my mother's finger pushing me out the door that time I had always been her poking me the hoods picked me up telling me a stone hit me and knocked me out they drag me down to the fairies where everyone from the trial was waiting we punted back down the river I even got to use a stick myself and

we watched the hell as a barn with its dead guard on top the interpreter was with us wailing like a ranch of Banshees

39. Mother

Garth Malachi - White Badge

Terrflub - Fly Sprayer

Th eMultiplayer - DOLA Radio Clerk

Big Town Weirdo - DOLA Radio clerk - has also been making amazing fan art - you can find it on Discord - see my twitter for an invite - and you can also find the fan art on twitter @bigtownweirdo.

Those are just old mother's tales, Howie. Only a priest - an adherent of some forgotten old order like the Tertulians would accuse the milkmen of worshipping 'devils.' The notion that men and women can be inherently good or evil is the relic of a bygone age. You've been with the organization for more than a year now. You've seen a lot of things only the most advanced milkmen ever see. Has anyone ever asked you to worship a devil? We delve into the earth, yes. But all in the name of scientific progress, as you well know. It is only through scientific progress that man's lot will be bettered - and we milkmen play a crucial role in that progress - you, Howie, are playing a vital role.

I've been nothing but completely transparent with you, lad. The milkmen don't just deliver milk - in wartime, we gather intelligence, because of our ability to penetrate every household in the nation. I then took the next logical step - developing a weapon to win this damnable war. This was my own initiative and we were lucky enough to find those like you and Frank among our ranks who turned out to be uniquely qualified to help us.

And as you can see with your own eyes - the weapon is proving to be quite effective. Despite Frank's unfortunate accident, we were able to salvage a certain amount of phlogesterion. The crepusculator turned out a useable amount of the vapours.

I brought you here, Howie, so you would be able to see for yourself how crucial our project is to ending the war and bringing peace to the world. I hope, when things settle down back home, that you'll be inspired, as Frank was, to gather more phlogesterion and to help us end this war forever. With victory, the world may advance into broad sunny hills. If we fail, we shall surely sink into the abyss of barbarism and despair."

After his speech, Stan just looked out over the battlefield and watched all the men suffocating from the poison vapours he'd made with the phlogesterion. He wanted me to watch, too - like he said - to get me excited about making more.

He talked more about how scientists sometimes had to make sacrifices to make sure that they were making the world better and that this was just like that - and with this overwhelming force, no one would ever dare go to war again, so that really, even though it seemed distasteful to watch, it was really just the price we had to pay for a peaceful world that was free of silly superstitions about devils and evil.

On the one hand, his talk made me feel better about myself because, sometimes, in the dead of night, I thought that I might be an evil person, just like some people at my trial said. But now I could see that it wasn't my fault at all. On the other hand, it was really very horrible to see and hear all those boys dying out there from the gas - I knew that probably a lot of them were just like me - aimless kids who weren't quite as clever as me and couldn't figure out how to escape the draft.

I think Stan also brought me there just to get me out of town while things settled down after my trial. There was a bit of a brew haha after what happened. First of all, the old stone fellow was a pretty big deal to the religious people - but it's not as if it was my fault that he got hit with lightning. Old rocks get struck by lightning every day. And also, the great thing about the death penalty is that they only get one bite at the tomato - if they screw it up, it's on them and the accused is free to go his merry way. Which, I guess, is where I was now.

Up at the front, I got to meet some of the milkmen who got stuck up there delivering cream to officers. It was bad news and I was grateful for my cushy milk route in the big city. We'd taken a train about twelve hours north - in the fancy officer's car, of course - but I could still see that war really was hell.

After the battle Stan and I went for a walk - we were victorious of course. We looked over the dead and it was all very unreal to me - how these weird waxy contorted figures could have been men who'd brushed their teeth just a few hours ago, I couldn't understand...

"You love your country, don't you Howie?"

"Of course!"

"Watch your step there, son."

"Oh...God..."

"Tow Law is like our mother - it raised us, taught us, protected us. And know, the mother land demands our service in return."

"And that's why we're so diligent about delivering the milk?"

"Yes, Howie. But sometimes the motherland demands that we give up what's most important to us."

"Our lives..."

"Perhaps, Howie. There are things more important than our lives."

"Our souls..."

"Souls...that's really the purview of the church...and in any case, I don't think those superstitions do us any good, Howie. I'm talking about...our loved ones. I've never told anyone this before. You and I have something in common - I understand your pain, Howie. For I too had a falling out with my father. I know how painful such a fall can be. In time, though, I made my way to where I am now. And you made the

right decision - I've found that it's better to rule the milkmen than to serve a cantankerous master....As milkmen, we bring the darkness to light and make it visible with the shining justice of our cause. So understand, Howie, that I know what I'm about to ask you will be hard. But we cannot let our emotions get in the way of what is best. "It goes without saying, Howie, that your future success with the department lies with figuring out where Frank found the phlogesterion. But I'm afraid you're facing another urgent matter."

I didn't know what he was going to ask, but the big lead up made me almost forget that we were strolling through a field of fresh corpses - some of them our own fellow countrymen at that.

"I have reason to believe, Howie, that someone very dear to you does not have your best interest at heart."

"Well, we were all at the trial - I don't think that's really a surprise."

He looked confused for a second - "Not your mother, Howie. Stormy."

Now it was my time to be confused - my vision narrowed as what he'd just said registered in my brain. I was somehow shocked, but not surprised at the same time."

"What?! Stormy?!"

"Think back Howie - the trouble with the crepusculator? Pouring phlogesterion down the drain?"

As he spoke, it all started to make sense. Stormy...my beloved Stormy...the mother of my future son...maybe she was working against me.

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, Howie. Her father, I'm sorry to say...got what he deserved."

I looked up at the greenish brown horizon...no sign of the sun...the flies were gathering and the sickly sweet smell of carrion was all over the place...and there, on the heaps of bodies and dirt, was the hound - the dog...I'd bashed his head in long ago, but there he was, staring at me.

"Mr. Stan - do you see that dog?"

Stan looked at me with a kindly look.

"I do. The doberman? Yes, Howie. I see him."

I don't think I heard another word he said for the rest of the walk, or on the truck ride to the train station.

Or for the whole train ride back. The field of bodies with that dog standing there and the gruesome beige sky - it burned into the backs of my eyeballs - it was the only thing I saw all the way back...sometimes I was conscious of a hunger pang...a conductor asking for a ticket...

I slipped in and out - watching the blur of trees out the window while some woman tried to talk to me - asking me about the front...the monotony punctuated by miasmic spells...giving my unborn son a bath and wondering where his mother was...and he asked me - since we'd pulled the plug on the whole thing - where does all the water go?

"It spews out like rain onto the people living below."

And he sat open mouthed "You mean poopy water?"

And I rustled his hair - "I guess so, my boy, I guess so."

And then I thought about the geyser....

About those stories about the boy who stuck his thumb in the geyser because there was too much water in his country...

About a fancy milkmen's dinner with Corwin - who explained that you always have to put a cork back in the wine bottle or it would attract vermin.

We stopped at some tree-filled place where one girl with an umbrella got on..

And then I was in downtown Mingsbight but it was like the first time I'd arrived at this strange city - I wandered hungry up and down the wharf wondering if the coins in my pocket would do any good....

I knew I just didn't want to go home after the revelation on the battle field, but part of me wanted to continue with the charade that I didn't know what was going on.

Until I was sitting on a bench with him - like I dropped right into the middle of everything....

WHEELAN:

"I missed the first ferry...stayed out late...big city lights, you know...so now I'm here until the next ferry comes at 5."

"(mumbles from Howie")

"No, the bones have gone out with us, too...perhaps the glow only lasts so long..."

"Stormy?...No...She always felt responsible for what happened to her poor father...tried to tell her...it's not your fault...not your fault...And you, Howie, you looked so guilty up there on the wicker chair...Howie...listen my son - I've known you over a year now, and...you're not the straightest arrow in my flock...so to speak...but I heard everything everyone said...and Howie...I don't know what happened back then...but it wasn't your fault, either. Kids never believe it - and you're just a kid, Howie... - *maybe*

*you'll never believe me - that's just about typical...but, try to hear me, son, it's not your fault...murder?
You don't have it in you."*

Then I remembered - Granard's son had opened up a fish shack down the way - we went...we bought fish sandwiches...and he and I sat there, waiting for his ferry, munching away like a couple of old pals...and after that I felt a bit less alone...a bit more on the ground...

Father Wheelan was a great guy, I thought, as I smoked my post-fish sandwich pipe and watched his ship get smaller and smaller...

I was feeling pretty good on my walk home....until I remembered -

Stormy What was I going to do about Stormy?

STORMY:

"Howie - she was here again...she dropped off one of those awful pies!"

And I wondered...was this all a ploy? Constantly pitting me against others?

"My mother??"

"Yes! She freaks me out!:"

"Why? Just for dropping off a pie?"

Then her attention went right to me - with a look that said, ‘how could you defend that creepy old witch?’

“Howie - are you okay? “

And then I realized how exhausted I was...so I sort of buckled and grabbed the stair rail for support -

The next thing, I was in bed sipping orange juice and my dear Stormy was looking so relieved....

Then I remembered Stan’s words -

“She blames you, you know, for what happened with her father. How could she love someone who was responsible for what happened to her father?”

But there she was smiling at me now...how was it possible? How *could* she feel like that about *me*?

She could have gotten any milkman at the station....why me?

The orange juice just wasn’t cutting it -

“Is there any of that pie left?”

“What pie?”

“My mom’s pie.”

“I threw it out! Howie - “

I got mad...

“It’s pie! We’re not rich enough to throw out *pie*, no matter where it comes from! My mom’s just trying to probably help us out!”

Stormy looked like I'd just kicked her in the head - and she just stormed out...leaving me there, exhausted and sipping my orange juice...thinking...thinking...

Could everything I thought about Stormy be wrong? She's been so good to me...But Stan was someone I trusted - my future was in his hand...although he did eat Frank right in front of me.

I felt the black seeds of doubt and distrust blossoming in the pit of my stomach and stretching out the every extremity, making me shaky and ill...

I heard her putting her rain coat on...

"Going to work" she shouted in a not so friendly way...

I just laid there, watching the rain hitting the roof across the road...Remembering lying in Stormy's bed when I was hurt...Driving up to the cottage and laughing while Florsham lay in the back...

I'd known Stormy so long, now. If she'd been up to no good, I would have noticed. She never asked me any details about anything...the bottle of phlogesterion...I could have written a note or something like Stormy said...then she wouldn't have poured it out, probably. So that was bit my fault, too. And when I stopped to think about it, the problems with the crepusculator were also partly my fault. And how could Stormy possibly blame me for what happened to her father after I explained what had happened to him?

And then all the puzzle pieces came crashing down around me - Stan was just reading too much into things - we was wrong about Stormy...

On the other hand - I'd need proof in order to get Stan to realize he was wrong. And maybe he wasn't wrong. I was sure that if I could find the phlogesterion and make him see that Stormy wasn't a subversive, I could get the job in the white tower downtown and still have Stormy by my side...

I didn't have to give up all my dreams - dreams that, oddly, included my mother....

But first thing's first - if I was going to prove Stormy's loyalty and make sure she wasn't a baddie, I'd have to give her some kind of test - something that would be convincing.

Maybe I could leave some secret milkmen blueprints - I'd leave them on the table and see if she took them - and then I'd make sure another milkman or two was on the case too - we'd follow her to her handlers, if she was guilty, which of course she wasn't - and if she didn't even care about the documents...

Wait - documents... I'd seen something...a letter...in CODE...I threw it out...but had there been others? Mostly Stormy got the mail...My heart started pounding - so maybe it was true after all...she was receiving secret messages...

I swallowed hard.

Well, I determined, all the more reason to conduct the experiment.

Downstairs, I glanced at the empty pie plate.

Maybe I'd been wrong about her, too. After all, she'd come all the way here just to offer us a pie - she just wanted to feed and take care of her son...why *was* Stormy so against my mother? Divide people from everyone around them and conquer, don't they say?

After washing up the plate and heading out the door, I pondered the number of miscommunications that might befall a man in his lifetime. I was certain I'd had my share by now. It was time to start sorting them out.

Somehow it was about midnight when I got to my mom's house. I knocked and knocked, but she never answered. The rain had started to stop and moonbeams were shining down...I just dropped the plate on the doorstep and walked away. Then, there was the sound of a door opening...I thought I'd turn around to the open arms of my mother's forgiving arms...but I just caught the quickest glimpse of the plate disappearing behind the closing door.

The days just went on for a while...me trying to sort everything out in my head...attempting to locate authentic blueprints to tempt Stormy...deciding when next I'd go see my mother again - I knew it was my duty to make her happy...they'd told me so at the trial.

Stormy kept her cool and acted like everything was fine.

For nearly the first time in my life, I was so confused about things that I didn't know what to do or what to believe.

Monday, I made my rounds as fast as a guy could. I wanted to leave a little extra time so that I could drop off a couple bottles of cream at my mother's place before Dwyer noticed I was late.

I knocked - I heard shuffling inside - the door cracked open -

"I have nothing to say to you..."

She grabbed the bottles and slammed the door -

"Mom! Can't we talk?"

I guessed she was pretty upset by everything that had happened...but I was her son. She'd forgive me if I kept persisting. I knew it in my heart. But it was still a bit annoying that she just took the milk - and Dwyer noticed I was short and made me pay for it on top of everything else.

I went home and Stormy wasn't there...which was super irritating because I wanted to talk to her, but she was at her 'job'. I decided to just go for a walk - and by the by I ended up at the market where Stormy worked. It was kind of busy but I just stood beside her at her cash register so we could talk.

"This really isn't the time, Howie."

“I know...but how could she just shut the door in my face?”

“Why do you care? She was awful to you. And you’re gonna get me in trouble.”

She didn’t want to listen to a thing I said - even though it was really important to me - so I just stormed out and left her there...and then, after she got home, and the whole time she was cooking dinner, I gave her the silent treatment -

Needless to say, it was a cold and chilly dinner.

“So when it’s about me and my mother...there’s no time to talk? But I have to listen to you about your dad all the time?”

She was on the verge of tears, probably wracked with guilt because of the point I scored.

And then she did start crying.

I got the hell out of there.

Out on the street it was brisk with the fall - the chill pulled me back inside myself...

Wasn’t there even one place I could go where people cared about me and understood me?

I thought about heading to the east end to find Scar and maybe find out what those pills were all about...or maybe the old birthday PUB I remembered so well...but I just drifted this way and that – maybe everyone was right - maybe the root of all my troubles was that I’d forsaken the one person I knew I should be able to count on forever and always...

I felt I was engulfed by the kind of delirium that only comes from being so torn up inside that nothing seems real anymore...and the only place you can turn is the place your legs carry you in the early hours in the dead of winter - when you might even be asleep...but you feel your frozen pants against your legs that carry you zigzagging back to the old familiar door...

And you knock before realizing - this is real.

“What are you doing here?”

“I have to talk to you, Mom. We can’t leave things like this.”

I might have pushed my way in, but she opened the door anyways...

“We have to fix this.”

“After what you did?”

“What did I do? Did you see any of that so-called circumstantial evidence? Did you?”

She just stared in my direction without really looking at me - maybe scared...probably full of hate.

“You’re my mom. You really believe I did that to dad?”

Nothing...maybe I was being too blunt...a roundabout way might be best...

“I’m going to get a big promotion, you know.”

She didn't say a goddamned thing. She inched towards her chair by the window...and even though you couldn't see outside because it was dark out and there was just a reflection of the inside on the window...she turned and stared out there...and slowly, inexorably, she took out a cigarette and lit it. She breathed it all in...and breathed it all out, like this was how she was exorcizing her demons. But there were no demons- there was only me.

"You're just gonna sit there and say nothing?"

For some reason, I remembered all of a sudden, McMyrtle, lying there in his peckerhead coma - and his finger twitched and Stormy got all excited because she thought he was coming back to life - but then he just stayed there doing nothing, like some kind of idiot,

And my mom...she didn't say a goddamned thing - if I waited forever would she say anything?

Then...I saw something I'd never unsee for the rest of my existence -

I turned for some reason - and there they were - shoved behind the trash bin - were my milkman boots -

To think...this woman had raised me up, feeding me and everything...packing lunch for me at school so I wouldn't be hungry...even though I threw the old bananas out because they were black and bruised and awful...and someone, somewhere made those boots...hoping some milkman would have a successful career delivering milk to young boys and girls with bright futures ahead of them - and now, as sordid as could be - there they were...stolen and useless.

And then I knew - my mother had stolen my boots.

My consciousness swam in blurriness...

She saw that I saw and said nothing...just turned back out the window and took another long drag...she didn't seem to care about what was coming one way or another.

Neck twitching, fists clenching I dragged myself out of there before I did something I might regret.

The steam was still building up in the middle of my brain.

Then, against all my defences, pinpricks of the truth came stabbing in at me. - I can tell you, with the hindsight of all those years behind me - it is hard to believe the truth even when it punches you in the nose/

I found some solace in a skinny little puppy that wandered down beneath the sidewalks...it was dark and I felt that someone might come out of the shadows and knife me in the back at any moment...but still, at least it wasn't raining down here...

I followed the little guy...maybe I'd find him something to eat...take care of him...

I almost caught up, but the tunnel widened out = the puppy ran and I followed him out onto the beach...the iron-gray sky and the inky water...it cold and I knew this was some northern clime...not the arctic, but still pretty cold.

The puppy went straight and fast and I followed him all the way to the rotting carcass of a huge whale...the tide just ebbing out...the puppy started munching and for some reason I felt very sad...

MAGICIAN:

"There there, Howie."

I turned, and, there, leaning on his umbrella, was the magician...

"You?"

“Oh come now, Howie. You know very well that I never went anywhere.”

I turned back to the puppy and the whale.

“Oh dear...still having trouble with that one decent act, are we?”

I felt the blood starting to boil in my head.

“I’m sure it’s all just a misunderstanding.” (then he snickers)

I just kept looking at that little dog ripping bits off the whale...getting madder and madder...I stormed past the magician - just about knocking his stinking self over...

The evening’s events kept turning over and over again in my head - I’d tried to do the right thing...but I wouldn’t be blamed for anything that happened now...after all of this...back on the street I saw the silhouette of the hound under an electric streetlight -

I knew where he was leading me and I didn’t even care any more.

I was going home. And nothing was going to stop me.

I knew the door would be locked - I just smashed it down - the hound ran in - right into the kitchen.

He stood there - ears up - ready to jump -

And she just still sat there...smoking...looking my way without seeing me...not seeming to care...maybe trembling a bit...- it was going to happen just like it did before...not my fault. I was shaking...

Then...some small voice in my head - Stormy would have to clean my uniform after...

Later...I imagined her just sitting there and looking out the window and turning greyer and smokier as the years rolled past...the sun would go up and down, the seasons would change, and she'd slowly but surely become a hollow shell...staring out the window as the cigarettes burned down between her fingers...those grinding dark thoughts just frozen there forever in her eyes...

At least I walked home with a clean uniform.

I was stuck between Scylla and a hard place...

*start to notice people being different - the consequences of the whale bones.

Secret documents...

WAIT - that letter...IN CODE...

STORMY FAILS THE TEST

The sins of the father should never be visiting the daughter.

Maybe, I thought,

He isn't totally convinced Stormy is bad - he thinks up a test...

Monster?

The door opened behind me - I turned, expecting to see the open arms of my forgiving mother,

The problem - is it too abrupt a transition from him being into Stormy and now sort of

He thinks about his duty to his mother...

He gets **her** fired?

LAMY?

THINKING OUT THE Phlogesterion

People becomes grey and rainy.

The awful thing his mother does - she doesn't care that he's going to get a big promotion...

He apologizes and she makes some weird remark - not caring if he lives or dies...

He sees his boots.

Howie also tries to repeat some of the things he heard at trial - did you actually see any of the circumstantial evidence? You don't know what happened. You only heard one side of the story - you never even asked my side.

*INCORPORATE - they never look at each other. His mother never really looks at him.

Then tell me your side.

He's about to tell her - he hesitates because it's grim. Then he spots his boots. Becomes enraged. The hound is back - but he leaves her there with the dog and walk and walks and plays fetch - he imagines his mother just sits there smoking and looking out the window turning greyer and smokier. And her eyes getting yellower as the sun goes up and down until she's just a hollow shell with her grinding dark thought just frozen there forever in her eyes.

He loves watching important generals like Longfellow groveling He wants to be like Stan,? Except more trustworthy and less murderous.

He sees the lights come back on in wheelman's church. Then flees to the coast road. Maybe be stormy was hiding out and the milkmen are after her.

Stan wants Howie to trap Stormy

There's something wrong with the world without Falena. Moral turpitude. Everyone becomes grey and listless. No magic.

Howie accidentally drank some so he's okay.

Howie goes back to st gaff's with Stormy, who gets fired because Howie interferes with her job as part of his entrapment.

He wants to get phkogester.

He realizes the milkmen are awful

He goes to the coast road to see Travis and there are no green flashes.

He realizes her can repopulate the whales. Turn off the geyser with a big bank vault dial.

On the front lines = Stan explaining that the milkmen aren't about Satan, they're about scientific advancement - while the gas is killing people. A bright new future in which evil will be unknown.

It's NOT his FAULT - ? Maybe...something evil happened to his father....

Outline -

A story - his mother is annoyed that he's still alive and ramps up the pressure - invading his home - he's afraid to come around the corner...he decides that he has to DO something - he reflects that maybe they're all right and he's wrong - he should be nicer - so he bakes a pie and brings it over (thus alienating Stormy) - she's still nasty - he flies into a rage when he sees his boots - he has an episode - there's still a dog? But then he decides it's not worth it - he restrains himself and leaves her...wants to stop his mother from bothering him - or to repair the relationship.

B - plant the seeds for a return to St. Gaffs.

the thermolizer can be reconfigured to repopulate the whale population?

Howie admits that he may have killed off the last whale. Admits it to father Wheelan before he leaves?
IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT

Stan wants Howie to go into one of the pits at the front and to show him what the gas can do?

The final scene - he dies, but knows that the whales are coming back.

The milkmen are purged of the demonic element?

"Is magic real" his son asks.

People start behaving badly?

How does he banish Stan to the other world?

He has visions - gets an idea of where the phlogesterion is?

Stan really demands that Howie be grateful for getting him off?

I gave up every walk along the river with Stormy

4. He returns to St. Gaff's with Stormy...meets Mr. Greenwood

Bathtub - I was giving my unborn son bath - he wanted to know where the water went - - it spews out like rain onto the people living underneath -

He has visions of plugging up geysers...

In a vision he has to plug the geyser so that it stops...

He goes underwater with the thermolizer?

Stormy was trying to destroy it...Howie intervenes...gets in the way of the milkmen and goes under the waves with the machine?

His mother keeps bothering him...he has this idea that he'll win her over....but she does nasty things behind his back -

HE FINDS HIS BOOTS there - has a violent vision - but restrains himself - I left her to her cigarettes and her looking out the grubby window mumbling to herself...

The crepusculator must be destroyed.

40. Dreams

I was pretty preoccupied at work for a while after, thinking about all that stuff with my mother. I guess I felt pretty proud of myself in a way for showing such superhuman restraint. But still it felt weird because I knew that from that time on, even though she didn't live all that far from me, I knew I'd never see her again.

Today, I was doing my rounds in the gloomy early winter mist. It was the same old town that it had always been, the same old laneways, the same old chimneys, the same slightly sour smell. But somehow I felt lately like I'd just woken up for the first time and like I was seeing it all for the first time. And what was it I saw? A dreary neighborhood in a town where most of the men were off fighting somewhere and I was here trying to build a life as a milkman with a girl who thought well of me. Is this what I wanted? I didn't really know...and it didn't really matter, since it seemed the die had been cast and my path was set.

After work, I was feeling a bit restless, so instead of going home, I wandered down to the banks of the river Kierston and watched as it tried its best to flush all that filth and sludge out into the sea. The trees were bare and even though it wasn't so cold out, it was damp and the wet was going right through my clothes.

Sometimes it all seemed so ordinary and small...climbing the job ladder to a job in a white building downtown. Stormy had all kinds of projects for fixing up the house. She was talking about getting a puppy. I'd never wanted such a regular life. I craved adventure and intrigue. But on the other hand, Stormy was suspected of subversion - and could get into a lot of trouble if she got caught. I didn't think my darling girl was a subversive, though. Her father was definitely up to no good, but I thought I knew her pretty well and I really got the sense that all she wanted me to do well at my job - which was really very sweet of her.

On the other hand, there was this constant nagging problem - I knew she'd been receiving coded letters from somewhere. So, like I'd said, I hatched a plan, just to make sure. If she was innocent, everything would go back to normal, and then I'd reveal the secret source of phlogesterion that Frank had found. I was pretty sure I knew what it was - but I couldn't get at it right away - I was afraid Stan would do something to Stormy if I left Mingsbight without proving she was innocent. He really seemed to have it out for her for some reason or other.

I'd snuck some blueprints for the crepusculator out of the experimental labs and I left them in the house. If she found them and tried to smuggle them out to the enemy, I'd know all about it and I'd have no choice to report it to Stan. If she were innocent, we'd continue along, trying to get to know each other and to grow closer after being thrown together in such weird circumstances...

I kicked an old bottle into the river and watched it sink down beneath the black, oily waves.

And then I remembered with horror - I was supposed to be cleaning the bottling machine after work today. We'd gotten a tip that an inspector was coming by and Dwyer demanded that I do a deep clean...He'd gotten the young guy, Brainerd, to spray...but I was going to be in big trouble if I didn't get that bottling machine clean...

I walked back the station as fast as I could. All my wistful thoughts were shunted aside like so much old trash. I cursed Dwyer for interfering with my solitary walking reveries - the only times I really felt like myself...

Luckily Dwyer had left already - which was weird because it was his rear end on the line if we failed the inspection - but that's just the kind of boss he was - he drove everyone hard except himself. Corwin never had any problem getting down on his hands and knees and scrubbing with us milkmen. He wasn't afraid of getting his hands dirty - he was a real leader...not like Dwyer.

Brainerd, of course, was young and new and it all seemed so big and important to him. He reminded me of myself when I was just a green tyro.

"Point the nozzle away from your face, son"

I was glad I could help guide the new generation...but I resented missing my afternoon with Stormy.

To tell you the truth, I had no idea how to clean a bottling machine. It was attached to the big milk vat. I took the lid off - the vat was big - maybe 20 or 30 feet across - and there was a mechanism for hoisting the lid up so you could clean it inside. So I turned the crank and lid was raised up. It didn't look too dirty to me. I got some buckets of water and went up the stairs (of course the vat was high up and the bottles got attached below...) I poured some soap in there and then threw a few buckets of water in there to rinse it out.

Everything was going fine - until it was time to put the lid back down. I couldn't do it. The crank was stuck. I tried and tried - in fact, I pulled on the stupid thing so hard that it made a weird noise and then wouldn't move at all. I couldn't show any weakness in front of Brainerd, so I just walked off like everything was fine. I tripped on the stupid bucket I'd left there, but I don't think the kid saw.

I walked out into the afternoon light with Brainerd, who was done spraying and cleaning out the milk hole - which was particularly dirty in this station for some reason - I guess Dwyer never bothered about it.

Brainerd was yawning....

"That was a good day today, kiddo. You keep up that pace, and you'll have a red badge before you know it."

"Thanks! I don't know why I'm so tired..."

And I noticed then that he had pretty dark circles under his eyes for such a youngster.

"Listen, Brainerd - you have to take this job one day at a time. Believe me, I know what it's like to just throw yourself into it and burn the candle at every end - but if you don't take a bit of time for yourself now and then, you're going to sleep in one day by accident and Dwyer will be really mad. Take it from one who knows - don't push yourself so hard"

"Thanks, Howie."

I was feeling pretty important just then - and that feeling only intensified when a big black car with a Department logo on the side pulled up -

“Get in, Mr. Coxwell.” The driver said.

And so there I was, watching the world go by out the window of the car...all the way to the labs. The guy escorted me to Stan’s office - not all the way. I had to climb the ladder myself.

“Howie - Any updates about what we spoke about last time?”

“You mean about how Dwyer never cleans out his milk hole?”

“Ah, no Howie, I already scheduled an inspection, as I told you last time - I mean about the phlogesterion. And about Stormy”

“I really don’t think we have anything to worry about with Stormy...really. I think it was all just a big misunderstanding.”

“I wish I could be as sanguine as you, Howie. But as you know, the crepesculator is still not working - whoever interfered with it seems to have known exactly what they were doing.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“And the blueprints are missing as well”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll turn up soon.”

I realized that I probably shouldn't have said that, so I quickly changed the subject.

"I have a few ideas about where Frank might have found the phlogesterion. I might have to take a few days off, though, to find it."

"Why don't you just tell me your thoughts, and we'll send someone to investigate."

"Well, sir, with all due respect, us Seekers - we do things our own way. I don't think any regular milkman would be able to find the stuff, if it's where I think it is."

He shifted around in his seat.

"Fine, Howie. But make it quick. We know that the enemy is planning an offensive and we want to be ready - you have three days. And then you *will* tell me."

"Yes, sir."

I definitely didn't know if I could pull everything together in the next three days. Little did I know at the time how important these next few days would be - and how little sleep I'd get. Stan must have been pretty much reading my thoughts, though -

"And another thing, Howie - how have you been sleeping?"

"Oh, I never sleep all that well, sir. Part of being a Seeker, I guess. I'm tormented by nightmares pretty much every night."

I was about to tell him all about the horrible dreams I always had about my dad, but he didn't really seem so interested.

He told me something about how a lot of milkmen hadn't been sleeping well, but I was sort of tuned out thinking about the blueprints and the nightmares from last night.

On the way home - in the car,

I day dreamed of walking in the dawn with Stormy along the banks of the broad majestic Kierston...all these memories came back to me, walking hand in hand with my parents at the fair I'd never been to, and those memories sort of attached themselves to the hopes I had for me and Stormy - maybe one day a little Howie, and buying him some cotton candy. I looked out the window...the whole city seemed to slow down in evening light - I felt like everything was revolving around me for just a second - like time wasn't really there any more. It was a bit of a premonition that I didn't catch at the time. But it was one of those moments that's like a turning point in a person's life...All my future and all my hopes for the future seemed to be still and quiet and right there in front of me...

I got home and I was still filled with that solemn still moment that I could never explain to Stormy no matter how much I wanted to.

"Howie - Howie? Are you okay?"

"Sure - just a long day at work - inspection tomorrow and everything."

"I think I found some of your work papers in my drawer - blueprints?"

Thank goodness, I smiled. I was right - she was totally innocent.

"Howie?"

"Yes, I just put them there for safekeeping."

“I don’t really want you getting into my underwear drawer, okay? And it’s not a good place for your papers.”

“I’ll bring them back tomorrow.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Definitely. Hey Stormy - do you remember your last dream?”

“No - you know, it’s weird. We were talking about that at work today. Everyone seems really tired - and no one remembers dreaming at all for the past few weeks. We’re all making little mistakes”

And it was sort a foreshadowing because just then I smelled smoke - she’d burned our dinner...

I tried not to make her feel bad about it, but it was really inedible.

“Is it horrible?”

“No! I’m just not that hungry.”

“You know, you could try cooking too some time. I have a job too now.”

“Humph...Actually, I forgot that I have to go see Father Abraxes about something.”

Really it was a total subterfuge - I was hoping to get something decent to eat out on the street.

I wandered and wandered thinking about the day...I drifted this way and that, until inadvertently, I did end up down by the cathedral of St. Fleming. I was just finishing up my spicy salami sandwich on the steps...and I was starting to shiver, when who should come walking out of the darkened church, but Father Abraxes.

“Howie - what are you doing here?”

“Oh, hi father. I was just meaning to ask you - did you notice that no one is having any dreams any more?”

“Yes, Howie.”

And he looked piously up to the moons - “As long as the whale bones are extinguished, mankind will not dream.”

To me, that sounded awful. A lot of the best moments of my life had been dreams -

“But I’m still having nightmares”

He just smiled knowingly and walked off into the yellow winter fog...

“Of course you are, Howie. Of course you are...”

I was freezing, I noticed. I should have known better than to sit on those cold stone steps for so long. But I’d been so caught up in my thoughts that I hardly noticed until now.

It’s really one of the most boring things ever when people tell you their dreams. But I had this dream - I’d been telling everyone that it was a nightmare but that was only partly true...but in the dream, someone had a old faded picture of me and they were telling someone they thought I was a cute kid and they kept that picture in their wallet. I guessed it was a nightmare because I knew it wasn’t true at all...

But anyways, I had to be up early for the milk station inspection in the morning. So I made a beeline for home.

When I got to the milk station in the morning, Dwyer was freaking out. I had to be in extra early as some sort of punishment for my sins, so it was just me and him in there. I didn't know why he was so upset, since me and Brainerd had cleaned everything up really well...

"God DAMN you, Howie. What did you tell Stan? This inspection is your fault. I know it."

"No way, sir."

"And why is this goddamned lid still open?"

"Oh, Brainerd broke the crank handle and I couldn't get it down. But it's clean."

"By the Whaler, Howie - one of these days..."

But anyways, by this point, the trucks had come in and the vat was filled with milk.

Dwyer was huffing and puffing, pulling on the chain that was connected to the lid, but he wasn't making any progress at all.

"Damn, you, Howie - get up here and help me!"

I started up the ladder when something totally unexpected happened - Dwyer took a step back, and then, like it was all happening really slowly, he tripped on the bucket I'd forgotten up there, and he fell over the railing and right into the vat of milk...

But as a stroke of uncanny luck, he must have pulled something just the right way on the way in, because the lid to the vat finally closed on top of him.

Unluckily for Mr. Dwyer, a bunch of things all happened at once right then. I tried to get the lid back off so I could maybe save him, but I couldn't. I heard some splashing and gurgling. And just then - Brainerd and the inspector walked in together. The gurgling was mostly subsided...

“What’s that noise?”

“Oh, probably just my stomach. I had a leftover salami sandwich for breakfast.”

“Hmmm”

There was a bit more thrashing.

Obviously I wasn’t going to ruin the inspection by saying that Dwyer was probably drowning in the vat, so I flipped the switch on the bottling machine just as the inspector started looking around. The machine made enough noise to cover up whatever was going on inside the vat. And I climbed back down the ladder.

“And where is Milkman Dwyer?”

“I’m not sure! He told us to be here bright and early. We cleaned everything, so everything should be in order”

“Very strange. I’ve never known a milk station manager to be absent for an inspection.”

I didn’t want to get Dwyer in trouble, so I covered for him as best I could.

“Dwyer was here late last night scrubbing - he’s probably just tired. But he has complete confidence in me and my colleague, here.”

“I see.”

“ He wanted me to show Brainerd how to bottle milk.”

And so, with the watchful eye of the inspector on our back, I showed Brainerd the ropes I'd never learned. It seemed pretty obvious, I guess. Put the bottles on the machine as they spun around the machine...and filled with milk. And, to my great relief, the milk was all coming out white. So Dwyer at least wasn't bleeding in there...probably no one would notice anyways.

And so, in a moment of great pride for me a Brainerd, after the inspector examined every nook and cranny, we passed the inspection. It was a moment I'd never forget. I figured at this point I could probably run a whole milk station on my own.

Before leaving, I look a last look - The vat stood grey and unyielding with its awful secret on the bottom.

I got in my truck and made my rounds.

It was just another day, with a few arguments about payments, and a couple of complaints about walking on flowers, but nothing out of the ordinary. One woman said something green was floating in her milk, but I didn't see a thing.

Then, when I was nearly back at the station - and there I saw a gaggle of police standing about...and an ambulance...even in the distance, I could see the corpulent shape of Dwyer under the sheet...

It was all so familiar - I remembered old man Billings...but this time, at least, it *really* wasn't my fault! I stopped the truck. I knew already that this was a turning point in my life. I got out of the truck and I thought I might be able to slink away into the noonday gloom...but one of the milkmen spotted me.

"It's Howie! There he is!"

I never did find out how they figured out there was a dead man in the vat of milk. And I really didn't know how they figured out that it was my fault - even though it really wasn't my fault.

I did a U Turn and gunned the engine, driving back...I got a few blocks, before seeing a milktruck following...I realized I had to go to ground...I turned down an ally, stopped the truck at an angle, got out and ran...

The other milk truck turned around and crashed right into mine - since it was totally blocking the way.

I ran back towards home...sometimes running, sometimes creeping and watching around the corners...It was really stressful, but my milkman training propelled me along.

When I got close to home, though - I peeked around the corner....and sure enough - there were DOLA agents standing outside. I didn't know if Stormy was home...but I saw a third agent come walking out of the front door...he spoke to the others, but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead when I realized that if they found the blueprints, it would mean that they were going through my girl's underwear drawer...Stormy would be completely grossed out...

But there was nothing I could do. There was really only one option for me. If I was going to clear my name and redeem myself, I would have to find the phlogesterion.

I made my way as best I could downtown...I had no idea there were so many milkmen and DOLA agents and police in Mingsbight. One of them spotted me - but I instantly knew what to do.

“Hey! Stop!”

“What?”

“Howie Coxwell?”

“No - I think I saw him run down there - you go that way and I’ll cut him off around the corner”

“Okay!”

A lot of these milkmen were pretty dumb, to tell you the truth.

I kept zigzagging across town...danger under every footstep

I knew I couldn’t wait around - the milkmen were everywhere. But I had the stand on Spencer’s Hill and look out over the old neighborhood. The schoolyard and the gasyard...I grew up here, I had some good times here, I had a lot of bad times here...the memories of my parents in these places seemed so close - but not like they belonged to any part of me anymore. I wanted to feel some kind of goodbye...since in the back of my mind, I thought I might not ever come back...but I just couldn’t feel it. The city I knew was gone now - it wasn’t a part of me anymore...and I had to run down the hill as fast as I could...whenever I crossed a street, as soon as I stepped off the sidewalk, I felt like I was falling into an abyss...until I got to the next curb.

I tried to dodge it, but ended up right in the old barber’s shop - whether I liked it or not - there I was and I couldn’t get out of that chair...the old barber, with his running pustules, got out his razor...he slapped it on the piece of leather and his assistant, from behind put the instrument in my mouth - a sort of cage that kept my mouth open - the barber looked down his nose at me and then, as I tried to scream, he moved in with a straight razor and shaved my teeth... just a bit at a time...I struggled and hollered, but to no avail...

“It’s got to be done, son”

The blood was everywhere...his assistant used rags to clean it up and tied the rags to a spinning white barber’s pole outside...the blood dripped everywhere.

“Get a bucket”

But the bucket was soon filled - and then it was overflowing - the barber let me out of the chair and pointed to a tap on the wall - "Turn it off."

"You turn it off."

"Only you can turn it off, boy."

And so I did...

And when I walked out of there, my teeth were lean and sharp - but at least they were still in there. Not like so many of my dreams when my teeth just floated uselessly away from me...

And if this was just a waking dream...at least I still had my dreams...unlike so many...when you don't have your dreams, you have nothing, after all.

I ran away from there, through a field of grain, until I fell off the other side into some secret guardian's hand, who set me back in the town...

I ran my tongue along my teeth, which seemed better now, as I arrived at the pier.

I scanned the area like an expert navigator and saw what I needed - a fisherman's skiff with one sail. That's all I would need...I undid the knots, with expert knot tying hands, and hopped on - all my sailing experience came in handy now as I steered the boat out of the harbor...the wind picked up...and caught the sail...I held the mainsail and headed out to sea...I steadied the rudder as I looked back to my home town - the sun was setting on Mingsbight, for all I knew, forever...I thought about Stormy...and in a moment of clarity, I knew she'd probably be okay with or without me...

But my destiny awaited somewhere off to the east.

41,

The sun was setting on my home town as I sailed towards my new home across the waves...

I sailed on through the night and into the dawn...Passing the southern tip of St. Gaff's island, I saw the ferry pass me in the distance, the glow of its lights shone like a beacon of permanent hope on a forlorn sea. I wondered if radio transmissions were flying invisibly over my head warning the other milkmen about me...

I'd show them all soon enough, though.

There was only a mild wind, so it was slow going...the wind didn't change direction, though, so I just clamped the lines in place and enjoyed the slow ride to the other side..

It took me all night and all day to get to the east coast of St. Gaff's. Luckily the ship's owner had packed a lot of salmon jerky, there was a big jug of water and there weren't any birds around. So the crossing over was really a good time for some reflection and contemplation...As I chewed the tasty jerky and watched the shimmery waves, I thought about how different my life was from my dad's. I bet he'd blow a gasket if he saw me now - a red badged milkman sailing across the channel, trying to help our country win the war...

As evening set in for the second time on my journey, I used the geyser to guide me up the coast. I knew I couldn't just sail right into the St. Gaff's harbour, so I aimed for somewhere beyond Travis and Naomi's cottage and the town.

With the last little bits of daylight, I expertly sailed my skiff onto the gravel beach. I had to be careful getting out, since the drop-off in the water was really steep - after the beach, the water was actually really deep. I managed to keep my feet dry, though, and I tied the skiff to a scraggly tree.

Then, I walked towards the geyser - it glowed brighter as the sky got darker...

As I got in amongst the houses of St. Gaff's, the town seemed greyer and darker than I remembered it. It was quiet - after the hustle and bustle of the big city...I guess I'd gotten used to the quiet when I lived here.

I knew where I was going, but the streets seemed to confuse me somehow...I accidentally ended up down by the waterfront where I heard a strangely familiar moaning...and I thought I saw a shape tied to a pole...it brought back all these memories...and the moaning really seemed to be accusing me...of what, I had no idea.

I walked inland away from the fantasm...

In the shadowy alleys, I thought I heard old man Billings cursing my name...and old professor Florsham expounding on St. Hobbes...

These maudlin streets were too full of ghosts and old memories for me...they swarmed and crowded and buffeted me...and I feared I might not be able to achieve what I was here to achieve...

I thought I was walking aimlessly, but of course I made it to the corner of Mercy and Grand...The rose bushes were all dead now...no one was taking care of the house...I stoped and looked at the bench...where that troublesome radio had lain for so long...While I was standing there, my old neighbour walked by...with her stick...and she seemed so much more lucid that usual...

"Howie...you're back!"

"Oh, yes, just for a bit probably"

"Come visit tomorrow?"

“I don’t think I can meet you tomorrow...”

“Okay...nice to see you...”

I kept on my journey to who knows where...old memories coming at me from every shadow and around every corner...

Did I really live all those moments? They all seemed like dreams...but then...they all seemed like they were right there in front of me...

Coming home is such a strange thing...

I stumbled almost blindly past the now gloomy church -

“Howie!”

It was Father Wheelan, and not his ghost, walking with an oil lamp up the street.

“Father Wheelan.”

“You look terrible, Howie - what are you doing here?”

“I came back to see if I could...well...”

“Don’t worry, my son. You don’t have to tell me. I know you’re in trouble. I know the milkmen are after you...come in here.”

He unlocked the big doors with a huge brass key.

“You get some sleep and we’ll figure it out together in the morning.”

And then, like that wonderful night so long ago when the wolves were terrorizing the town, I slept wrapped up in a blanket on a pew. But without my beloved Stormy and without any light from the grey bones overhead.

I hadn’t slept a wink on the boat ride over, so I drifted off into one my most recent recurring nightmares...

about the baby whale I might have inadvertently and indirectly killed...It’s a shame that life was like that sometimes...Why did they make baby whales so delicate and fragile when the arctic sea can be so cruel?I really didn’t know.

I just saw the baby whale nosing around its dead mother...not knowing what to do or what to eat...and I was trying to swim around and help out, but the water was freezing and I could hardly move a muscle...no one was dreaming, but my nightmares never stopped.

I jumped up on the pew - what was I doing in here? I had a job to do. I couldn’t let ghosts or nightmares stop me from doing my duty...I threw off the warm wool blanket and jumped to my feet.

I tiptoed to the front door and managed to open it without too much noise...the bad thing is that I couldn’t close the door behind me. I always felt bad about the afterwards...not being able to close the door behind me...I always wondered if it caused Father Wheelan any problems...

I walked back out into the night...it was colder now...not too much longer until the dawn of that fateful day...

I knew what I had to do and I was going to do it. Sticking to the shadows so as not to be seen,

I saw - up against the wall of the milk station...yet another shadowy figure - some ghost come to haunt me, no doubt.

As I got closer - it wasn't a ghost at all - it was a man peering in the window - I must have kicked a rock or made some other noise....the man turned - and there - back from the dead - was Mr. Greenwood.

I was dumbfounded.

"Oh, hi there, Howie...I was just..."

"You're not dead?!?"

"So Stormy never told you. Good girl..."

"No Stormy definitely doesn't think you're alive - she still cries herself to sleep half the time...what happened?"

"She didn't get my letter?"

I reached back through my memory and then something clicked -

"So you were the one writing coded messages?"

"Yes!"

"Oh!! I thought Stormy might have been communicating with enemy agents. I burned that letter."

I'd really never seen such a mild mannered person get so mad so quickly - his face turned red and I think that if he had a knife or a gun, he would have killed me right then and there...

"Look at it from my point of view! How could I have known it was you? There was no address or anything. And we're at war! Come on!"

I could see that he was pulling himself together -

"You have to tell her I'm alive."

"Sure, if I ever get the chance. To tell you the truth, the milkmen are after me, now."

"Why?"

"Oh they think I killed my boss, which isn't exactly true."

"So...Mr. Corwin is...dead?"

"No, no - it was Dwyer, in Mingsbight. You didn't even know we moved to Mingsbight? Stormy and I? The people here weren't very nice to her after...everything happened."

"I didn't - how is she?"

"She's fine. Working at a grocer's...but what happened to you?"

"SHH"

We heard someone walking by and ducked into the shadows...

After whoever it was left, Mr. Greenwood told me all about his trip to Elkhorn and about how he couldn't tell anyone he was there.

"Then why did you come back to St. Gaff's? To see Stormy?"

"No - In Elkhorn, we noticed that all dreams have stopped and that the whale bones had all gone dark...we deduced that the last of the falena must somehow have died...I thought to myself that Howie Coxwell probably had something to do with it...so they sent me here to find out what happened and to rectify the situation."

"Rectify it how?"

"By administering a large quantity of properly treated phlogesterion into the sea."

"So you know..."

"Yes, Howie - the geyser. It's pure phlogesterion. I've somehow got to alter the thermolizer, fill it with phlogesterion and pump it into the sea."

Up to now, I'd been enjoying my chat with Mr. Greenwood - but it was clear that we'd both figured out the truth about the geyser. I was a little concerned about where he was going with all this.

We've also figured out what the milkmen wanted with the phlogesteiron - we know they've used it as a weapon and we're determined to stop their access to it. If they ever find out what the geyser is made of, they'll have ready access to a horrendously destructive weapon - we can't allow that to happen."

I really didn't like the sound of that.

“You’ll help me, won’t you, Howie? The milkmen are after you too, now. You know what sorts of evil things they’ve been up to.”

I had to think fast.

On the one hand, I wanted to be the one to show the milkmen that the geyser was phlogesterion in order to redeem myself and get my career back on track. And Mr. Greenwood was planning on messing that all up by turning off the geyser and interfering with the thermolizer. On the other hand, I’d nearly gotten the man killed, and if Stormy ever found out that I’d done him any harm after finding out he was alive, she be furious.

I figured the best thing to do would be to go along with his plan...maybe I’d drag my feet a bit and by the time he was done tinkering with the thermolizer, the milkmen would arrive for their morning rounds and I could just kind of extricate myself from the situation, let them handle Mr. Greenwood and then I could still be the hero for finding the phlogesterion.

“Sure, Mr. Greenwood - the poison gas they made really is an awful weapon.”

“Good. I believe we only have a couple of hours before the milkmen arrive for work. We’ve got to get inside the station.”

“Oh, no problem”

I knew where Frank hid his keys, since he forgot them all the time - under the mat at the front door...

We got in and sure enough, there was the thermolizer...just sitting there...

“I can retrofit this without too much difficulty.”

I watched Mr. Greenwood tinker for a while...

He had a closer look...

“We have a problem, Howie. The intake tube has been damaged - If we try to place it over the geyser, the pressure will be too much - it will destroy the machine...”

“Can’t we just fill some buckets and pour it in?”

“It will only work if the incoming liquid has a precise amount of pressure - more than a bucket, but less than the geyser...And in any case, I must find a way to stop the geyser when we’re done so the milkmen can’t use it...”

And then, without thinking about what I was saying, I just blurted out,

“I saw a tap down there...I bet I could turn it off.”

“Brilliant Howie - you turn it off and I’ll position the intake tube at just the right moment...Now help me wheel the thermolizer out. We’ll put it on a milk truck and drive it to the coast when it’s full.”

We got a flat dolly thing and it turned out that the thermoizer wasn’t as heavy as I would have thought...with some grunting we got it up on the dolly...

But then a light went on in the front room...

“SHH. I’ll go see who it is.”

I walked back and sure enough, there was the peckerhead getting ready to open the station...

“Howie!”

“Hey Albert.”

“You’re in trouble - we’re supposed to catch you.”

I kept staring at the stupid scar on his head as he spoke.

“You probably got a message from the radio tower?”

“Yes, exactly”

“Listen, Albert - enemy forces have infiltrated the transmission station in Mingsbight - they’ve been trying to trick you - saying that I’m working for them. You’ve got to help us get this thing on a milk truck.”

“We?”

Then Mr. Greenwood appeared -

“Hey!”

I winked at Mr. Greenwood.

“Mr. Greenwood’s been in hiding - we have to move quickly...”

“Why don’t we wait for the other milkmen to get here?”

“No, Albert, there’s no time. As a red badge milkman I command you to help - quick!”

So he helped Mr. Greenwood open one of the big door on the side of the station and wheel the thermolizer to the parking lot...we were all lit up green from the geyser...

The geology men had made a manhole covered tunnel to examine the roots of the geyser - they never found anything interesting but I knew I would...I clambered down the ladder and sure enough, it met up with the stairway down into the darkness...I’d forgotten to take a lantern or anything, but there was a faint glow a couple hundred feet below at the base of the stairs...

I walked down as carefully as I could...it was so quiet down here, except for the humming of some machine...when I got to the bottom, there was an automatic washing machine humming away...there was a tap on the wall behind it just as I’d suspected...

I turned it, and there were all these noises of pipes clanking and popping...I ran back up the stairs as the lights got dimmer...

And, there was the thermolizer - glowing green - and there was Mr. Greenwood standing beside it beaming.

“It worked! Now to get this to the sea.”

Me and Albert and Mr. Greenwood were really struggling to get the machine up onto the back of a milk truck - but we finally succeeded..

“McMcyrtle - What the hell are you doing? Howie? Get down from there.”

It was Corwin - He looked really mad. Beaver was beside him. I was on the back of the truck.

“Beaver - get the police here, now.”

And Beaver ran off as best he could. Mr. Greenwood jumped in the truck.

“I never would have expected this from you, Coxwell”

“Mr. Corwin - it’s not what you think - It was all Mr...”

But Mr. Greenwood hit the gas and I had to hang on for dear life. Who knew the old guy could drive like that...

The last I saw of Corwin he was turning red with rage...How was I going to sort this out now??

The peckerhead just stood there looking confused, and for a moment, I almost envied his obliviousness.

Anyways, there was nothing I could now, but hold onto the thermolizer and enjoy the ride...Usually when I went out this way, I was driving so I never got a chance to just look around...All the nicely kept pastel houses...could I have ever been happy in one of those? I guessed that it didn’t matter now...

We drove out to the coast road and out of town...It was almost peaceful watching the rosy red fingers of dawn stretching out across the ocean...the stars fading the moons hanging low...

It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day...But then I saw a cloud of dust coming our way along the road from town - another milk truck in the distance.

Mr. Greenwood stopped at a place where the road was pretty close to the water and got out...we were most of the way to the fisherman’s cottage.

“We’ve got to get it in the water.”

“How do we get it out without tipping it over?”

“Get the back open.”

“Look!”

It was Travis, running towards us with his harpoon and big helmet - someone was running a ways behind him, shadowy in the pre-dawn...

“I saw they geyser went out - what’s happening?” Travis said...

But before Mr. Greenwood could answer - She threw off the blanket she was wrapped in, she must have come over on the ferry- I saw all that black hair tumble out - Stormy...she saw her father -

“DAD?”

Tears bursting, she ran into his arms...

“You’re...?”

Mr. Greenwood held her tight and he looked so at peace...and she looked so happy with her face on her dad’s shoulder, even with all the tears and sobbing

Something snapped in me and all of a sudden, the only thing I wanted in the world was for them to stay there like that...

A shot ran out -

Beaver was getting out of a milk truck - they’d caught up ==

“- fire!”

A fat cop and a thin cop were there with rifles...one was aiming at us -

Travis ran at them and threw his harpoon, it grazed the fat cop

The thin cop shot at him and Travis went down, the bullet ricocheting off his helmet...

I was sort of frozen there...I looked back and Stormy and Mr. Greenwood were just there by themselves - like nothing could touch them...

I turned again and Beaver was loading a shotgun...

I knew what I had to do...I jumped in the milk truck...turned it on and put my foot to the floor...Luckily Beaver and the cops were all standing close together...I had enough room to get up to a good speed...I knew this would probably be the end of my career as a milkman, but that image of Stormy and her dad there on the cost road was all I could see and I couldn't let the milkmen break them apart...

The sound of the impact was much worse than when I'd hit the muskrat. But I saw the three bodies go flying as I flew forward - smashing into the windshield...the milk truck flipped over - I saw the ground above me out the window...the truck hit the ground...and rolled right over the edge into the deep green sea...and, with me inside still, it sank like a stone...the thermolizer had gone flying too and a split second later I saw it splash down...shooting phlogesterion from the spout -

I tried to get the door open, but I couldn't...I pushed and pushed the door...losing air...but I kept going down and down...

The sea, though, was turning all green and bright...

Finally I managed to get the door open...i'd forgotten that it was locked...but I was so cold in the icy water...

I knew as I pushed my way out of the milk truck, that I was never going to make it to the top...but just before...I saw...the falena...dozens of them swimming out to sea...

And then I couldn't push towards the surface any more...I sank again, back down....watching the falena swim free...

After I was done sinking...I started floating up, and up and up...

And as I floated off I saw Beaver, his leg bent backwards, trying to crawl to his truck... the thin cop was dead and broken... the fat cop, bleeding all over the rocks...I saw Travis getting up and holding his head..

I saw a fancy, futuristic looking boat sailing off into the horizon - the man from Elkhorn held the wheel and Stormy and her dad were there, still locked together...I hoped, forever.

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I Don't want you to feel bad for me. But after I died again, things didn't go well. When I got to the gates, they looked me up - the guy there said he had to get the manager since he'd never seen anything like this before...so the manager came - a serious looking man with a huge white beard...

"No, that's correct - banished. I'm afraid you'll have to wait here until someone can take you to your quarters."

I cursed my bad luck and sat on one of the benches. I could see the city I'd been in before, all the strange angles - and the people I saw there seemed to be having fun...

Eventually someone came and took me to an apartment in a building that was pretty far away...it was just like my old place on St. Gaff's...except there was no painting on the wall, and I couldn't see out the windows...there was just a weird orange glow out there that kept the place lit up all the time. It got a bit dimmer at night, but not too much. It probably would have been hard to sleep if I'd ever felt like sleeping...i paced around a lot at first...then I saw for long periods...just...thinking about everything

And every morning a ghostly milkman would drop off a bottle of whole milk. That was pretty much it for food for me....

I always had this suspicion in the back of my mind since I was a kid that the whole universe didn't really want me around...I guess being stuck in this apartment was sort of like the universe finally getting its way...

I didn't have dreams or spells or anything like that anymore...just memories. And even though the life I'd led might not have been the best life, I still missed it.

I missed driving up through the hills to the radio station and dreaming about living out there with Stormy...

I missed simple things...like Granard's fish sandwiches...I missed that first day I'd gone to church and the first time I'd seen the glowing whale bones...I forgot to tell you that as I'd floated up, they were all lit up again...I could see them through the windows of Father Wheelan's church as Mrs. Noseworthy stumbled out in the morning light...

I missed doctor Barrett and all his silly advice...

I even missed that peckerhead McMyrtle...I knew now that he meant well, I guess...

I missed looking out my window at the ship they were building...

I missed day dreaming about what life would be like when I was making a lot of money as a high ranking milkman with Stormy at my side and maybe a kid...

Once, we'd thought Stormy might be pregnant...and I remembered seeing my unborn son's soul in a dream... I saw his face in a steep inlet - steep canyon walls with the blue water below...lightning crashing...and I never felt like I'd ever known someone the way I knew that unborn boy...but then there was that awful night when Stormy came running out of the bathroom in tears....

She cried and cried...there wasn't going to be a baby...

I'd been dreaming though, about what it would have been like...the three of us...

Sometimes you can miss a life you never had. Sometimes there's a hole so big that no one can ever fill it.

I heard a story once about a sinkhole in country Buckle that was so big, no one could ever fill it up. Sometimes I feel a bit like that - I try to stay out, since there are monsters down there, but sometimes you slip and fall - and then before you know it, you're being chased by dogs or demonic cows or rotten old people with sticks and horrible breath.

It got pretty boring in there...but there was lots of paper and a bunch of pens...so I thought the best thing would be for me to write down the story of Howie the milkman...after all, maybe someone some day would find it useful...and, even though I'd been banished...I didn't want to disappear completely

I figured I'd start with my first trip out to see Travis...since that day seemed like the first day I'd really lived my life.

My parents, when I was little at least, had done all these nice things for me, trying to make sure I had a normal life...but really, I knew the truth even when I was too little to talk...I'd have to get out on my own to really live...whether anyone ever really knew me or not...

But that day - I had some inkling of what I might one day become...and that day I spoke to Stormy for the first time...

It really seemed that everything was moving in the right direction that day...but then things really didn't turn out the way I'd planned...

Everything that happened was probably just as much a surprise to me as it was for you. But really, it's sort of a gift to be able to sit here and tell you my story.

Maybe death is just an endless reflecting on your life - in an instant that lasts forever. Maybe, that is, if you don't get to go to the isle of the blessed or that strange city or anywhere better than this.

But for me, I'll be driving up the coast road to interrogate Travis forever...and I'll always be watching Stormy trimming her rose bushes and hearing her voice for the first time. All those moments are in front of me like they just happened and they always will be...so that's not so bad.

I really hoped my story would go on and on. But it just didn't. I thought there'd be a beginning and middle and an end, like the way stories are supposed to be - but instead, it was just a bunch of stuff that happened before all of a sudden it ended. I guess most of the time it's up to everyone else to make sense of what happened in a person's life and to make it fit into a story - I guess that's why people like stories so much.

I know that i'm not the cleverest guy in the world - but I know that **I see things that no one else sees I see all the things that bubble up in the cracks between each of us and what they really look like.**

The only saving grace besides the milkman was that a paperboy dropped off a newspaper every week. So at least I could keep up with current events.

There weren't any stories about Stormy or her father. I guessed they went to Elkhorn. Stormy was pretty handy. I bet she met a nice guy there...but it didn't bother me so much.

There was one story I was particularly interested in reading about. The scientists kept trying to figure out why the stars had turned green...

but they couldn't figure it out.

They forgot that some of the things that happen in the world are just plain evil and there's really no other explanation. You never know where that evil in your life might come from - maybe you decided to go left instead of right one day or you forgot to do the thing you were supposed to do - and who knows where that led. Or maybe one time someone you really needed was there one day and gone the next...

The scientists never figured out why the stars turned green. But I know the reason for everything that happened - the truth is that the stars turned green that night because a boy was really missing his dad.

