

The Milkman of St. Gaff's, Episode One Transcript

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Call me Howie. I'm a milkman here on the island of St. Gaff's.

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

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

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

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

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

I remember him clear as day standing up at the podium...

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

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

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

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

It was quite a speech.

And there I was on my way to see Travis the fisherman. My truck rattled away over the coast road. The *red* moon was still up. The fisherman's cottage was about 5 miles out of town.

A muskrat waddled across the road. I aimed the truck right at it, wondering what kind of a sound it would make if I ran it over. The little blighter wasn't moving too quickly, but I veered away at the last second.

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

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

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

I came around the bend and caught sight of the pastel blue house, though it looked almost black in the red moonlight.

I didn't have the truck's headlamp on since I forgot to fill it with oil. The boss says we'll get electric lamps soon. I arrived earlier than usual. That's what surprised him.

There was old Travis, standing on the edge of the sea with a spyglass and a lantern at his feet. He heard the motor and jumped. Put the spyglass under his coat and picked up the lantern - as if nothing had happened.

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

"Morning Howie, you're out early."

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

"Two bottles it is, Howie."

I went back and got the bottles. And then I remembered what the Corwin had said. Watch out for any suspicious activity. You never know who might be a subversive. Even someone who seems like a good fellow might be up to no good.

Travis seemed decent enough. He had a nice young daughter, Naomi, and mostly kept to himself. No wife that I ever heard of. His house was the furthest from town and I got stuck with his route. No seniority. But I thought to myself as I got those bottles out. Might he be signalling some enemy craft out at sea with that lantern? And what a hero I'd be if I uncovered such a foul conspiracy.

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

"What is it Howie?"

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

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

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

The old codger was one step ahead of me.

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

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

He was on to me. Time to think fast.

“Have you caught any good fish lately?”

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

“That’s true, that’s true.”

He had me there.

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

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

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

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

“Howie?”

“No, Travis, I’d better get going.”

“Be seeing you!” And with that he walked back up to the cottage, the lantern lighting his way.

I made up my mind then and there to keep a careful watch on Travis from here on out - *decent fellow or not*.

I wouldn’t report anything now. I’d gather information. Get him talking. He wouldn’t trap me like that again.

I turned the crank on the truck and got it started. But as it got out onto the coast road it was making a **funny sound**. I heard a tittering, like a **child laughing**.

The engine started making especially odd sounds just as I crested the hill. Then - it stopped.

The truck rolled down the hill and I put on the brakes.

I got out. It was lighter now. I opened the hood. But who was I fooling. I wouldn’t know a tappet from a tie rod. I tried the **hand crank** again, but the blasted thing was dead.

It was going to be a long walk back. Maybe four more miles into town. If I didn't get back fast enough, I'd lose the whole truckload of milk and surely my job as well.

I looked out over the island to see if anyone was about. I hadn't been on this island but a few weeks. St Gaff's was far from the mainland. Mostly barren. Some pastureland in the middle, but I'd never seen it. Where I was there was nothing but rock and the road into town. What did catch my eye, a few feet up the road - perched on a rock was a stone gargoyle, maybe a foot tall - scowling at me. I stared at the thing for a moment - transfixed.

The sun was just showing itself over the horizon. I squinted - and thought I saw - the gargoyle move. Was it smiling at me? I stared into its eyes and I could feel —

It was happening again. I'd told myself that getting out of Mingsbight might stop it, even though I knew it wouldn't.

The ground was getting so soft - my feet, sinking -
- sinking -

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

I was still sinking

I knew some vast creature would be waiting for me down there...but -

among the rocks on the bottom.. I saw my mother at the kitchen table ... serving tea - I sank down down and couldn't stop it.

And *he* was there - across from my mother - sitting at the table, bloated - that face

Eyes turned to green jelly - his lower jaw gone now

the upper teeth - grinning accusing -

His head lolled back with the current as he looked right at me - the pit of my stomach gave way - I tried to scream, to say something to him - and felt *my teeth* falling away - I watched them float off in a haze of blood. I could see nothing through the bloody water but **huge dark shapes moving towards me** - I sucked deep and felt the water fill my lungs -

I thrashed and pushed hard as I could to get away - *from them*.

I was in thick weeds - clawing through

I pushed an armful of the thick green stuff away in the water and came face to face with the Doberman - the dog from the road - eyes red snapping at me - the dog's face grotesque in the water - teeth exposed.

I pushed as hard as I could to get up - get to the surface -

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

I was soaking wet.

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

Travis always walked to work and back.

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

"That gargoyle." I pointed -

(Chuckle?) "My daughter Naomi put that there. Said it would ward off bad spirits. Didn't give you a fright there did it? (Laughing), Did you take a dip in the ocean, Howie?"

I couldn't tell him what I'd seen -

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

"You just have a seat inside there and try to stop shaking. I'll have a look at the motor."

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

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

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

Back through the classier part of town. Big old houses. I delivered to Mrs. Noseworthy, the old bat, took the bottles and huffed when I told her about the truck breaking down.

But my crankiest delivery was Mr. Pyman on Grand street. He wasn't home. His maid said he was piping mad and stormed out of the house a while ago. I dropped off the milk and pressed on.

On the corner of Mercy st, lived the old Tinker - Mr. Greenwood. He was always up early and fiddling with some machine. Nothing in the world seemed to make him happier than his little inventions that I could hardly figure out. His house was a mess of ropes and pulleys, gears and wheels for transporting things where he wanted, watering flowers. I always put the milk bottles in a metal box that automatically withdrew into the house as soon as I closed the little door.

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

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

We'd never spoken before. I'd just watched her from a far.

BEAT

She raised her eyebrows since I hadn't answered still.

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

"Yes, I can see you're the milkman."

"Howie. Pleased to meet you."

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

"Of course"

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

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

"Stormy," she said.

"Stormy?"

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

"Stormy."

The whole way back to the receiving station I felt like I was driving that truck through the clouds. Over and over again I saw her turn around and heard her name...Stormy.

And I forgot what kind of thrashing I was in for when I got back to the receiving station.

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

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

"Where have you been? We've had all sorts of complaints."

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

"Get your scrawny behind inside this instant. Corwin wants to see you. I'll park the truck. (Then trailing off? With the sound of a truck starting) By goodness these boys'll be the death of me. If I just had 5 milkmen like McMyrtle..."

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

As I went in to the station, I heard yelling. But it wasn't Corwin's voice. There was Mr. Pyman, waving a newspaper up at Corwin's face.

When I got closer, Mr. Pyman aimed his newspaper at me.

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

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

"My truck broke down on the coast road."

This didn't go over too well. Mr. Pyman continued to berate me, Mr. Corwin and the whole organization. Corwin kept smiling at him, cool as a cucumber. He assured Mr. Pyman...

he wouldn't have to worry about late milk deliveries anymore.

Finally Mr. Pyman left, muttering about the hopelessness of new boys, motorized trucks and innovation in general.

Corwin's assistants, Frank and Beaver, were standing not far off. They both had the red badges of distinguished milkmen. How I longed for one of those badges... Corwin motioned to Frank and Beaver with his head, and they went out - following Mr. Pyman down the street. Corwin wasn't smiling any more.

Then he looked at me. He was calm.

"Is delivering milk too complicated for you?"

"No, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Howie, sir. Howie Coxwell."

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

He walked away. I was desperate - -

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

Corwin stopped and turned. His gaze, intense - withering.

"And?"

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

Corwin thought about this for a few moments.

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

He brought me back to where all the milk was pumped in and out of trucks. I saw, for the first time, the electric thermolizer. It was a huge contraption with wires and lights and gauges. I'd never seen anything like it.

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

“Yes, I do. He’s on my route.”

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

“That’s just awful,”

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

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

“The Greenwoods seem —”

“What was that, Howie?”

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

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

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

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

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

Billings stops me. Now he was smiling - smiling in a constipated kind of way, mind you, but I supposed it was the best he could do.

"Just a moment there, Howie."

"Yes?"

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

The last thing I wanted to hear - given the circumstances that brought me to the island.

"Your papers say you're from Buckle."

"That's right."

"You know the people of Buckle don't have to sign up for the Tow Law draft. Since it's occupied territory."

"Course I know that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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