

Episode 3

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

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

I got up and looked out the window. They'd slapped this building together right beside the shipyard and the big unfinished hull was there looming in the dark. In the darkness it looked like someone had taken a bite out of the horizon.

And then a thought popped into my head. No one on this island knows about my past. They won't suspect me.

A few mouthfuls of cold sausage later, I decided to go for that walk after all.

And then I was out there, alone, in the sea breeze. And no one in the world knew I was there. I felt free...but I was still haunted by this feeling that I'd done something terrible and couldn't remember what it was. I tried to push it down as far as I could. I told myself,

"Here you are, in a new place, with a bright future. Maybe this island really could be home."

At the station, I offered a cheerful good morning to Old Billy on the Wall. He seemed to be in a fine mood - although the twinkle in his eye told me he knew what had really happened yesterday. If only he could tell me what it was.

I started my rounds. First out to see old Travis.

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

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

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

But Travis responded instead, “We think there’s a whale out there, Howie.”

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

“Be seeing you.” Travis said as I drove off.

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

“Get out of here.”

I was a little put out to tell the truth. It wasn’t my fault her husband got arrested. Even if the files he supposedly took were under my mattress. And like I said - they hadn’t cancelled their order and I could have gotten into trouble for not making a delivery.

The Greenwoods wouldn’t be back until tomorrow, earliest.

I also had this nagging worry that Billings had in fact got off a phone call about my post code before he kicked the bucket.

I decided to have a chat with Father Wheelan to see if I could find out. Father Wheelan was a rather portly fellow and quite a messy eater. He always seemed to have greasy spots on his frock. As I mentioned, the only telephone in town was in the bell tower. It exclusively for official military, police or church business. Unless Father Wheelan made an exception.

“So Father Wheelan, there was quite a kerfuffle in town yesterday, what with Mr. Pyman being arrested and poor, poor Billings turning up dead.”

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

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

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

“Mr. Pyman? You mean to jail?”

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

I did indeed know what that meant.

But he went on, “Listen, lad. You pass by Granard's Chippery just before coming here, isn't that right?”

“Yes, father, it is.”

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

It was a good deal and I agreed.

After my deliveries , I met with all the other milkmen in the Big Room. Corwin wanted to give a talk about everything that had happened the past couple of days.

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

prevented certain catastrophe. Let that be a lesson especially to you younger boys. Do not trust too much in the appearance of things.

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

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

Let this be a reminder that there remains at least one other agent somewhere in our midst. An agent who thinks nothing of brutally murdering one of our own in the quest to serve the enemy. Be vigilant.

As milkmen, you boys are exempt from conscription to the front lines.

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

A huge cheer went up and all the boys jumped to their feet. I cheered too, being swept up in the moment.

I thought Corwin was just the best.

Later, after everyone had cleared out, Corwin called to me.

"Howie?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Any news on the Greenwood front?"

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

He chewed on this for a moment.

"Keep me updated."

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

A broad fatherly grin crossed his face.

"And why is that, Howie?"

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

Corwin's grin got even bigger.

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

He didn't know how right he was...

Or maybe he did.

"Yes sir, mum's the word."

"Good boy, Howie."

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

"Howie. You forgot to drop off your log for today."

"I was just about to get to it, Peckerhead." Except I didn't actually call him peckerhead to his face. I just thought it.

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

"I sure can, Mr. Corwin!"

I could see McMyrtle turning a sickly shade of green.

"But -" he started.

"And you, McMyrtle will take over spraying for flies."

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

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

The peckerhead smiled and I think maybe he even believed what Corwin was telling him. Meanwhile, I was glowing inside like one of those lamps that glows really bright. I could see, clear as day,

me wearing a red badge.

I had a few hours before I was to sign out a truck and go do this radio thing. I just sort of wandered downtown. I was pretty surprised to see Mr. Pyman tied to a post by the ferry dock. His hands were tied with thick ropes and he still had a gag in his mouth. When I walked past he sort of yelled as best he could, which scared me.

Some old sailor who was hanging around saw this all and started chuckling to himself. I went up and asked -

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

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

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

"Quite possibly many days and nights."

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

The road to the radio transmitting station wound westward through the middle of the island. It was on the highest peak - A Lomond, as they called any mountain of a certain height on St. Gaff's. The interior was mostly devoid of human habitation. There were some farms on green rolling hills, light brown cows munching on grass. The

source of all our milk and cream. Altogether it was a pleasant drive. At the top of Mount Glenmoy was a corrugated tin shack with a big metal pole sticking up high into the sky. I looked out over the island. I'd never been to so high a place before and had never been so alone. I wished I could just stand there and watch the clouds roll by all day. I thought my mother would love this prospect. And then I remembered what had happened between us...and ducked into the shed.

Inside I was stunned to see a mass of machines of all shapes and sizes. Knobs, dials, lights, cables and wires. The phonograph machine Corwin had mentioned. I'd never seen one up close. I had to do the radio speech at 5PM sharp, by the clock on the wall. I had a few minutes, so I poked around. In a closet, I found a dusty old machine that I thought was a radio. About a foot across, with three dials. It clearly hadn't been used for a long time and I figured no one would miss it. So I packed it the truck thinking that if I got it working, I could listen to Eliza on the radio.

Just before 5, I got out the instruction book and the paper Corwin had given me. I turned the crank on the big radio until the lights came on. Found the microphone.

When the clock struck five, I pushed a button on the phonograph and heard the silliest little tune you ever heard. When it was over, I read into the microphone:

“Braka Braka Braka.

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

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

Braka Braka Braka.”

I hadn't a clue what it was all about. I set the record back to the beginning and played it again. And just like that I was done.

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

When I pulled into the station my daydream stopped. The air was weird and dark and again I heard a digging sound inside Corwin's office.

Billy on the wall followed me with his eyes as I drove by, not saying a word. I bet he knew what they were digging for. But he wouldn't breathe a word about it to me.

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

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

Ack - something flew past me, brushing my face - a lot of them... some sort of dust? and a horrible smell. I looked up ...my dear lord. It was like something from one of my episodes...

7 or 8 of them

A flock a dead birds - crows. Half skeleton...rotten.

I sneezed - from whatever dust they gave off....

They circled over me a couple of times and flew off across the town...

I looked around again and I don't think anyone else saw. But I had to cover up that hole. Digging is one of the worst crimes you can commit if you don't have a permit.

I grabbed a milk crate from the back of the truck and put it over the hole - that would have to do for now.

I was pretty shaken - but then I thought to myself, no harm no foul. No one saw... and the birds flew off anyways. If they were even real, which probably they weren't It was probably my imagination acting up again.

I composed myself as best I could, and went in to drop off the paper with all the numbers on it. Beaver, huge as ever, was at the front desk where Billings used to sit.

He stared at me with those dead eyes that knew too much. He gave me the willies.

I dropped off the sheet and headed home to my dinner and a few pages of Eliza Pike to purge the weird feeling Beaver had set on me. I had the radio under my arm. I'd have to figure it out some other day. As I was hauling the radio up the stairs, Mrs. Somertag stopped me.

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

"Ummm Yes, sure Mrs. Somertag."

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

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

The next day, Stormy and her father, Mr. Greenwood, were back. It was time to pull together everything I'd learned for my second interrogation.

When I arrived, Stormy was outside again doing some kind of gardening, dressed all in black. She heard me getting bottles from the truck.

"Hi, Howie."

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

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

"I never been up that far."

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

"Sounds very nice, very nice. Maybe I'll be going up there. On official business."

"Official business? Delivering milk?"

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

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

“Like what sort of business?”

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

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

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

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

She didn’t seem to know what to say to that. So I went on.

“I’m in line for a red badge. A couple of our secret missions, and I’ll be quite an important fellow down at the station.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

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

“Oh. Okay, then.”

Mr. Greenwood came out. A jovial older man with a few curls remaining on his head and and thick bifocals on his red nose.

I’d been fiddling a bit with the old radio I’d found and couldn’t get the blasted thing working. Seemed like a good ice-breaker.

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

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

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

“Sure, Howie, sure.”

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

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

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

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

“Sure Howie, sure.” He waited a moment as if he wanted to say more... And then he did.

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

“Dad. Don’t,” Stormy said.

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

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

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

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

“I’m just curious is all,” he said.

“Mr. Pyman’s been arrested, fair and square. And I’m afraid the thermolizer’s in the back room. Totally off limits to eyes of civilians.”

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

“Sorry about dad. Curious as a cat, he is.”

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

“That makes sense,” she said.

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

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

"Sure I would!"

I couldn't believe my ears and I knew I'd remember that moment the rest of my life. We agreed to meet at 8. I tried to finish the week's Eliza serial, but couldn't stop staring at the clock. I couldn't eat dinner. And long before I had to, I spiffed myself up. Put on my one decent set of civies. Slicked my hair back with a spoonful of lard. Was about to leave, when there was a loud banging on my door. It was Beaver.

"Boss wants to see you. Right now."

"But I have..."

"Right now, I says. In uniform."

There was nothing for it but to go with Beaver.