

The Milkman of St. Gaff's

Episode Two: Files and Flies

Howie:

I was imagining different ways of killing Mr. Billings.

Or at least hurting him real bad.

Maybe I'd run him over with a milk truck. Pour some insecticide in his tea.

Why Billings had it in for me I'll never know. But figuring out that I'd written the wrong post code on my job application...That was the work of a truly depraved mind.

I was just opening a bottle of fly juice and imagining how Billings would sound choking on the stuff and —

“Stop!”

It was McMyrtle.

McMyrtle was another milkman about my age - 18 or so. He was the golden boy of the operation and everyone just assumed he had a bright career ahead of him in the service.

He had 'red badge' written all over him. I couldn't stand the peckerhead.

He showed me how the stuff had to be diluted and how you had to put gloves on and use a special funnel since you might burn yourself otherwise. He was telling me all about the places that were difficult to reach and how to use the sprayer - I told him to get lost and I could figure out how to spray for insects, thank you very much. He said, “suit yourself” and left.

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

Now..First of all - the spray stank like vinegar and rotten eggs. And second of all - the place was clean as a whistle. So I didn't really spend too much time on it, truth be told (to tell you the truth?).

And also there was a sickly feeling in my stomach from the fly juice and from worrying what was going to happen tomorrow.

So I locked up and made my way home - feeling worse and worse.

On the way home there was a sign for a doctor. Dr. Barrett - Doctor and Apothecary. I'd never been to a doctor before - never had the money for one. I decided to go in thinking maybe he could help with the nausea...and with my other problem.

I sat in Dr. Barrett's office. There were cabinets of powders and liquids of every colour. He was dressed all in black, sort of like a priest. I didn't know quite what to expect.

I told him I thought I'd probably swallowed some of the bug spray. He said it wouldn't hurt if it was just the one time. He didn't seem to care.

I think he expected me to leave, but I just sat there.

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

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

That seemed to get his attention.

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

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

"Ecstuceus."

"Pardon me, doctor?"

"It sounds like you've got ecstuceus. A kind of trance accompanied by loss of reason and occasionally hallucinations."

"Oh doctor - don't misunderstand - it's not me. It's...McMyrtle. He's quite far gone, to tell you the truth. I'm worried for him."

"Nonsense. I know McMyrtle. He's fit as a fiddle - sound of body and mind. Ecstuceus can be treated, Howie."

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

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

"I certainly do, doctor."

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

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

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

"Sure, doctor."

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

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

I got back to my place. One of the new clapboard buildings by the shipyard. I had a bare room just about like the 20 other rooms in the building - a bed, table, shared bathroom down the hall. A picture of a whale hung on the wall.

I had my dinner of cold beans and sausage. By the light of the window I read a few pages of my favorite serial - Eliza Pike, Detective Extraordinaire. Eliza was a wealthy woman, but she spent her time tracking down missing children and orphans from the poor part of town. The ones no one else cared about. Whenever she was at some society party and some rich banker would laugh and ask her why she bothered with this occupation, she would stick her finger in his face and give him a right dressing down - she'd say things like - "Money isn't everything, you know!" I loved how she stuck it to those stuffed shirts. I hear there's a radio drama of Eliza now. But I ain't never owned a radio.

In this week's story she was tracking down a fat little fellow who'd been kidnapped by a chemist who believed in fire gods and wanted to sacrifice the young pudger. I couldn't wait to see how it ended.

Outside my room the shipyard was winding down for the day and the sun was getting lower and redder.

Banging - getting louder.

Later, I was lying in my bed - staring at the ceiling and trying to figure out what to do about Billings - and the banging started.

It happened most everyday that the woman next-door started hitting the wall with a large stick. If you ever saw her on the street, she always had this stick with her.

Muttering to herself. She'd lost her mind long ago and her sister, the landlady, put her up in the room beside mine.

I tried to put the banging out of my mind.

I HAD to have a plan for tomorrow. I couldn't let Billings ruin my future life's work. Maybe I'd interfere with the telephone somehow so Billings couldn't make a call? Try to get hold of my file? Maybe blackmail Billings about something?

But my mind kept going back to the things I'd seen under the ocean...the horrible dog's face...my mother down there...and him.

And about Corwin's mission - about watching Mr. Greenwood -

And about the doctor - would he tell someone at the receiving station if her saw me driving, which he surely would at some point?

Finally I'd had it - before I knew what was happening I was up on my bed - screaming at the top of my lungs and pounding on the wall -
STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT.

The banging stopped.

I heard some muttering...a couple of minutes later there was a knock on my door. It was Mrs. Somertag, the landlady. She couldn't have been more than four feet tall and just about the same width. I never saw her without a broad smile on her face.

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

“Everything’s fine Mrs. Somertag. Are you here about the banging? I didn’t mean —”

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

“No, it was your sister banging on the wall with her stick like she always does - and then I was banging back. Could you ask her —”

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

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

“Right you are, Freddie.”

After she left, I started drifting off - and then it started again.

I put the pillow over my head - but it was no use.

Soon after, I was out on the street in the moonlight . There was no one around. I didn’t know where I was going...I passed by the cathedral.

The only telephone in town was in the cathedral’s bell tower.

Maybe I could get in there and break the thing.

But the great oak doors were locked.

I continued downtown - it was a clear night. The red and white moons were casting weird shadows over everything. I saw old Mr Florsham, the retired professor shuffling around. The old guy couldn’t sleep and was often seen rambling through the streets at night. I just walked on past him.

When I got to the receiving station, and passed by the parked trucks...

I thought I heard sounds of digging coming from Corwin’s office. The station, by the way, is a big square building with an adjoining lot for trucks and deliveries.

It’s all painted over white, except for Billy on the wall. That’s what I called him anyways - a big mural of the most perfect smiling milkman you ever saw, holding up a

bottle. "Cold Delicious Milk" it said. I never failed to greet old Billy on the wall with a cheerful "good morning" before my shift. I'm sure he was put up there to set us milkmen in the right frame of mind before going out into the world. But tonight, old Billy on the wall seemed to be glaring - asking me what the blazes I was doing out here. So I walked on past without a word.

In addition to the main station building, Corwin had an office built on the side of the station. On the side where the trucks parked. He was a busy man so he needed his own space to work uninterrupted...no one was allowed in there. The only really striking thing was that his office had a big set of double doors instead of just the one door.

And that's where this digging noise was coming from.

But probably my mind was playing tricks on me. An echo of the old woman's banging on the walls...

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

What was that? Sounded like a tool dropping. [Tool drop mechanic] Maybe I wasn't so alone? I listened and didn't hear anything more.

Perhaps hurrying up and getting out of there would be best.

The backroom where Billings worked and where all the files were - was locked. I didn't have the key to that door.

Picking the lock might work. If only I had some clue about how to pick a lock. It was dark and I groped around for something I could use.

And there was that digging noise again.

To hell with it - I smashed the door with all my weight and fell into the room. The moonlight was shining in the window and I went through the personnel files as fast as I could. Alphabetized - but my file wasn't there.

Billings must have taken it home with him.

So he didn't even trust me that far? The miserable low-minded bastard.

There was no way to fix the door...and Billings might figure it was me rooting around in there in the night. So I grabbed an armful of the files to make it look like an act of

industrial espionage and ran out of there fast as I could, stuffing the files under my shirt.

Once outside, I locked the front door - and to make it look like a proper burglary, I picked up a rock, smashed the front window and ran like hell.

But I froze -

Standing there, just outside Corwin's office, was Beaver, Corwin's bodyguard. He was holding a shovel and just staring at me with no expression at all.

I turned away and ran all the way home clutching the files under my shirt.

I didn't know what to do with the papers so I shoved them under my mattress...and lay there awake - sweating and trembling until it was time to get to work...I don't know if I slept a wink that night.

When I reported to the station that morning, the police were already there. Inspector Piercey was examining the broken window shards with a magnifying glass and one of his men was speaking to Billings.

I watched Piercey for a moment - he was mumbling to himself about particles and fibres, testing the wind with his finger...and Billings snapped at me -

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

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

The morning went along without incident. Travis wasn't acting so suspicious this morning. Mrs. Noseworthy huffed at me despite my timely arrival.

I dreaded dropping milk off for Mr. Pyman after the spat yesterday - but his wife answered and took the milk. She looked upset. Well, I'd be upset if I were married to old Mr. Pyman, too.

The last stop, of course, was the Greenwood household.

It occurred to me as I pulled up to the house that if I did a good job with this Greenwood assignment, Corwin might overlook any minor discrepancies in my files. And the more I thought about it, the more I saw that this was the key to all my troubles. If I succeeded, I could not only thumb my nose at Billings, I'd probably even get a red badge. And Stormy would have to take notice of a red badge. She'd have to give me a chance then. And all I had to do was find some kind of incriminating evidence against Mr Greenwood and make sure Stormy never finds out it was me who found it. I knocked on the door determined to charm my way into their lives - and to unearth whatever it was Corwin *knew* was in there. But no one came to the door. I knocked again.

The neighbour popped her head out "there's a note, dearie."

And indeed - there was a note at the foot of the door. It read,

"Death in the family. Out of town until Thursday earliest. No milk. The Greenwoods."

I *cursed* my bad luck and started back to the station.

On my way, though, I saw something highly unusual -

Passing back by Mr. Pyman's house, there were two police cars parked outside, and two officers were dragging old Mr. Pyman out of his house. He had bruises on his face and his hands were all bandaged up, maybe from resisting the police, - he was kicking and screaming and his wife just stood there covering her mouth with both hands. And then Mr. Pyman spotted me and turned red as a chokecherry - he pointed at me and in a weird high pitched scream, shouted, "It's him. This is all his doing! I had nothing to do with it!"

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

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

The officers stuffed a gag into the old man's mouth and shoved him in the back of the car.

This was all highly perplexing since I knew it was actually me who'd broken into the milk station last night and I didn't see Pyman anywhere. Maybe he'd snuck in after I left? What on earth was going on? I almost drove home to check the papers under my bed - but I'd be late getting back to the station and was in enough hot water already.

I pulled the truck onto the lot and there was Billings waiting for me - his ugly red lips grinning at me.

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

"No trouble, Billings."

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

And he pointed to a satchel slung over his shoulder.

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

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

I went back and got the juice - but I had the shakes in my hands...I could feel a pressure rising in my head....I remembered what the doctor had told me - 'If you start getting anxious, just have a drink of this here stuff and you'll be fine.'

The bottle of Podexium was in my bag. I uncorked it and took a few gulps.

I got to spraying - and by the whale - one day of inattention surely had made a difference.

There were flies buzzing everywhere. Even if I somehow got off from the post code fiasco, there was no way Corwin would let me off the hook for all these flies. The man hated vermin.

I sprayed every little nook and cranny - every pipe - I watched the little buggers die - but still they kept coming - the air was getting thick with the things - rubbing against

my skin like a carpet - the buzzing in my ears...they were landing on me - expelling their acid and trying to digest me - I knew they were. The sprayer empty - I surrendered - and the world went black - buzzing, close, hot, and I felt I'd been swallowed - and I was crawling - in the blackness - through a tunnel - - they were talking...laughing - milling about with glasses of champagne.

I was in a Mingsbight tube station with no trains - just a lot of fancy people in gowns and dinner jackets.

I tried to get through to the exit, up to the street - but couldn't get past the press of bodies...the women's lips covered in garish red lipstick...drinking, talking, laughing - I pushed and pushed - and then one by one they disappeared - each one shot up into the air like an angel flies up to heaven -

Until I was alone - with the dog - the Doberman - the hound from hell with its red eyes and thirsty fangs - it ran me down - it bit my leg hard - snarling it wouldn't let go - I shook it off and ran like the dickens - across the station - I got to the wall - I was about to jump down into the tunnel and run -

But something welled up inside me- what was this dog? Why should I run?

As it leaped - maw agape and aimed directly at my throat - I grabbed the thing in mid air and slammed its vile head into the wall. It fell - and I fell - still clutching its neck - I smashed it's head against the floor tiles again and again - until its skull went soft in my hands and the brains oozed out its ears.

And just like that it was rotten and festering - and its dead eye looked laughingly at me.

A train passed through the station without stopping -

And I was soaked in sweat in my bed. There was the picture of the whale. My detective magazine - and I could've cried to be back in my own place with my own things and the shipyard out the window. I checked under the bed - and the papers, thank goodness, were there. It was early evening now...

But something was hurting - my leg - and there was a knocking at the door - I could hardly get up -

It was Mrs Somertag -

"My goodness, Freddie - your leg! You got it caught in some machine?"

I looked down and saw that she was right - there was a real bite out of my leg and it was bleeding all over the place -
My head was pounding like I'd had a couple of pints of midlands whiskey

I opened my mouth but nothing came out -

"Well Freddie - you'd better get down to the milk station. Something terrible's happened."

I ripped up an old shirt and tied it around my leg as best I could and hobbled down to the milk station - it was just about sunset.

When I got there - the police had already arrived - Corwin was standing and talking to Beaver and Frank. He gave me a sideways glance as I passed by. - The other milk boys were there. McMyrtle was even crying.

I pushed through to see what all the fuss was about-
And there, lying on the ground was Billings. Half his throat torn away -
Flies crawling all around his revolting red lips... a few maggots crawling around his nose. And if you haven't seen those things - they can really move.

His dead eye looked at me - but the bastard couldn't say a goddamned thing. And there, on the ground was my personnel file that no one in their right mind would care to examine as closely as that dead man on the street there.

McMyrtle was standing beside me.

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

"A terrible shame." I said.

Mr. Piercey came up to us .

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

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

"If you saw anything strange, you should tell me right away.

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

"The poor man," McMyrtle whimpered.

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

I limped back home in the red light of dusk - I racked my brain trying to remember... knowing that what happened to Billings was somehow my fault...knowing I'd done something terrible...but not quite what...

I stopped in an alley and puked - I wiped off my mouth with my sleeve. The sky turned a brilliant crimson as the sun dipped over the horizon, and some other feeling bubbled up and mixed in with the black forgotten memories...

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