

## Episode 4 DOLA

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

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

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

So I tried to distract him.

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

He cocked his head to the side but didn't say a thing. Just kept staring at me. He surely was the weirdest milkman I ever met. And I guessed Stormy would be left sitting alone at the store wondering what kind of a jerk I was.

So off we go to the receiving station. We walked along in silence. It felt like rain was coming. And it was quiet - quiet like the town knew to stay out of the way of whatever was happening down at the receiving station tonight.

Course, I was used to nights in Mingsbight, where groups of kids as young as nine roamed the streets at all hours whooping and hollering. I snuck out a few times with those boys and girls, The Pirates of Jeddore, we

were called, and we raised more hell than a band of drunken soldiers. But back then...unlike most of those kids, I had parents and they quickly put a stop to my nocturnal sorties. But those are some fond memories.

Walking in silence with this big oaf of a milkman...without so much as a word about what we were up to - and missing my date with Stormy - I finally felt all the responsibilities of being an adult come crashing down on me.

We got to the station, Beaver pointed to a spot beside Corwin's office. "Stand there. Don't talk," he said.

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

Anyways, this Walker comes out of Corwin's office and says to Beaver, "He'll be about three hours, so just sit tight."

And I blurt out,

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

They looked at me - as shocked as ifl Billy on the wall had just spoken, but Billy just seemed to wink at me. So I shut my trap and settled in for the long haul.

I could just see Stormy now...looking at the clock, wondering where I was. She'd probably think something terrible had happened - she'd hardly be able to hold back her tears as she paid for her soda with her own money...outside the pharmacy, she'd break down - inconsolable. She'd weep all the way home. People would stop to ask what's wrong, but she wouldn't even be able to answer.

Beaver sat on a bench on the sidewalk and smoked a pipe. I paced about - vibrating all over wanting to know what happened with Stormy and wishing I could go to her.

Finally Beaver burst out -

"Stop that blasted pacing, you bloody booby."

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

"And how are we tonight there Billy?"

He didn't say much. His smile was sort of a cruel mocking one tonight. I thought he'd be a better friend to me after my being so cordial with him every morning, but finding no help from Billy, I just sat myself down on the curb and tried not to let my woes get the better of me.

I sometimes looked over at Beaver sitting there, betting he'd never had a real woe in his life.

Anyways, around midnight, up drives a big glossy black car. The kind you might see outside a bank in downtown Mingsbight. And out steps a very grave looking man in a dark suit. His face gray and gaunt in the moonlight.

Just as he gets out, Beaver knocks on the door to Corwin's office. And out comes Corwin. They shake hands and then just stand there like they're waiting for something. Not a word spoken between them.

And that's when I noticed a sign on the car door. A white circle with a cow head in the middle. And I read the words. Department of Lactic Affairs. But by accident I read the words out loud. I sometimes do that.

Everyone was glaring at me. "sorry" I said.

"Shut. Up."

Beaver hissed. So I just stood there trying to look mysterious like the others. So the man is from the Department of Lactic Affairs. I should try to make a good impression.

And there we wait. Maybe half an hour or so. The man from the department of lactic affairs kept looking at his wristwatch.

Then something happened that I wasn't expecting at all would happen. Down the road comes Frank. And he's leading a big white bull. Right down the Main Street of St Gaff's at half past midnight. And he was being more calm than you'd think he'd be. No one was around since usually people went to bed pretty early around here.

When Frank had the bull up close to the station, under a gaslight, the man from the department went up and looked it over. He took out a little brush and a magnifying glass.

Still no one said a word. Until the department man said,

"not a single black hair."

Corwin gave a very slight smile and Beaver opened the big double doors to Corwin's office.

There were a bunch of candles lit inside and all the rest of them started leading the bull *right into* Corwin's office, where he worked.

I started to follow, but Beaver said,

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

So in they all went, closing the door behind them, and there I waited with no clue how long I'd be there.

So I waited and waited.

Old mister Florsham walked by on one of his late night walks. Poor old fellow couldn't sleep as usual.

"Hello there Howie."

"Hello Mr. Florsham. Can't sleep?"

"I can't. I was reading from St. Hobbes and the wheels get to turning and I've got to get out and walk."

"Is that what you used to teach at the university?"

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

It was time for thinking fast. So I said, "oh we're just doing some maintenance work on the pipes and such. Got to be done at night so's not to interfere with deliveries."

“And they left you to stand guard?”

“Yes, that’s it mr Florsham.”

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

“That’s right - you’ve got it right on the nose there.”

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

“I hope not, Mr. Florsham.”

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

I chewed on this a moment before answering.

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

Chuckling a bit. - “okay Howie, I’ll leave you to it.”

And with that he wanders off. Clearly I was getting the hand of obfuscating and dodging.

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

the same way he'd arrived.

Beaver came up to me.

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

Then he sticks his big finger into my chest.

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

I felt like I just about fell through the floor. Even though I was out on the street.

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

As I took the road for home, I started sniffing...then I sneezed. When I looked up - I saw them - three of those dead crows that escaped from the hole the other day. I stared at them. And they stared at me. I froze as one swooped down - I shielded myself with my arms but the thing pecked at my head. I pulled at a bit of my hair before flying off. I yelled - and waved frantically trying to get it off- it retreated - but when the other two swooped towards me I ran the other way with every bit of speed I had left. When I couldn't run any more I stopped and turned - winded and gasping for breath. I was afraid I go back home...I couldn't run into those things again. It was really turning into a terrible evening.

Without knowing quite where I was headed, I found myself down on the pier. It was getting light in the east even with the spitting mist.

I heard a strange moaning and thumping a ways ahead of me. When I got close I saw what it was and hunched down behind a fence and saw

Mr. Pyman - he didn't look well at all. He already looked thin after just a few days tied to the post there. He was shivering in the cold, moaning and banging his head against the pole. Probably he was delirious. Seeing him made me feel pretty awful. Probably it was worth braving the birds to get away and maybe get some sleep before work.

Then, with real horror, the clock tower on the pier struck 4. There'd be no sleep tonight. My uniform was already on and I'd have to head back to the station right away to make it on time.

And there was old Pyman moaning away. At least he can get some sleep whenever he wants.

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

On the coast road out to see Travis, I could hardly keep me eyes open. I didn't know if there was any use keeping them open, since I started seeing things - green flashes out at sea.

One, then another. Then a third.

I blinked and shook myself. But then I saw it again. Something green glowing out there. Mayhaps I was dreaming, slumped over the steering wheel back in town somewhere - or maybe I'd driven into the sea and was dead, and maybe being dead was just like a foggy weird dream that mirrored our everyday life.

To test my theory I shouted out to the sea - "And what about it Mr. Greeny? Are we alive out here? Or just rolling around in our graves?"

But I didn't see anymore green flashes after that.

The road drifted on past and I thought about how nice it would be if I were out here with Stormy, watching the stripey red dawn and talking all about the mysteries of life. The moonlight shining on her black hair...

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

"Did you see, Howie? The Falena?"

"The what, now?"

Then he seemed to remember something.

"Ah, nothing, Howie."

"Was that one?" Naomi cried out.

"Just a second, love."

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

The fisherman was acting strangely again, that was for certain. I made a mental note of it and stored it away for future use.

Back in town, I made the usual rounds. I got the usual harumph from Mrs. Noseworthy. I had no idea what the old bat’s problem was. But I was getting quite fed up with it, to tell you the truth.

I picked up Father Wheelan’s fish sandwich and brought it to him. The speed with which that man got the thing unwrapped and into his kisser always astonished me. These are big, hearty sandwiches with lots of mayonnaise and crusty bread. Usually he couldn’t take his eyes off his meal, but today he tried talking to me as he chewed.

“Howie, why don’t you come to my sermon this Sunday?”

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

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

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

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

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

Some people you just can’t reason with.

She and I used to exchange a few pleasantries every morning, but now it's all gloom and long faces. As if it was somehow my fault her husband got caught doing the subversion.

And anyways, this morning, I didn't have time to worry about her. I had to screw up my courage to face Stormy and try to explain what had happened.

When I got to the tinker's house on Mercy street, she was outside. She saw me and turned sharply. About to go inside.

"Stormy! Wait"

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

"And where were you?"

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

"Nothing to say? Fine."

And with that she bolted into the house. I felt suddenly sick and didn't know what to do.

Mr. Greenwood came out, looking a bit sheepish. Not exactly mad at me, but maybe a little perplexed at how to deal with all complexities of his daughter's love life.

“Just two bottles, Howie.” He was almost kindly. Maybe he’d understand.

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

“Yes?” He asked.

“Tell her... I’m sorry?”

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

“Thanks Mr. Greenwood.”

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

I managed to dodge Corwin at the station, at least.

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

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

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

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

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

My Dear Stormy,

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

Dear Stormy,

You might not know it, but being a milkman carries with it certain *infallible* and *irrefutable* responsibilities. She'd never believe it about the milkmen. And we're not even supposed to talk about it anyways. Especially the nighttime stuff.

Dear Stormy,

I sometimes have these spells. I've had them since I was a kid. You see, I'm not from St. Gaff's. Instead, I'm from Mingsbight and not the nicest part of the city either. I didn't grow up with all sorts of fancy things like you. Anyways, these spells are sort of like sleepwalking, except ... My family...In my neighbourhood...everyone had at least seven kids. My parents, though only had me. **No scratch that...**

Sometimes when I was a kid I would fall into these episodes...and I would fall very ill and it was very hard to take care of me. I used to cause problems in my sleepwalking.

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

But my parents. They could hardly sleep for all the trouble I gave them. My dad had a good job at the factory, but he told me he couldn't keep it because of me and my god damned spells. He had to get odd jobs after that and work as a maintenance man at an apartment building for the factory workers he used to work with. And he got mad. Every day. And like I wrote above, everyone had all these kids and my parents just had me.

Because of me they couldn't have any more. The spells come and go but back then it was something awful. They said I broke a bunch of windows on the street one night and my mom and dad had to pay and not only that but my dad lost his job at the building. And he came home drunk - which didn't happen all too often, really - and he was yelling and blubbering mad and sad - and he screamed at me.

"I should never have pulled out out of that creek. No one'd be the wiser if I'd let you die that night."

He didn't mean it, probably, but I ran away then...and I got sucked down into it like always happened...

I woke up in a filthy alley behind a pub in the wee hours of the morning. I forgot for a while why I'd run off...

I stumbled back home...just as the sun came up I got there. The police cars were outside.

**God damn it.**

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

I found myself, hands in pockets, just walking in the red starlight. I'd tell you I was walking aimlessly, but I knew where I was going. I walked past her house three or four times...

I thought maybe if I could talk to her she'd see...

Some lights were on but I didn't know which window was hers. I saw a curtain move and stopped - looking up.

Her silhouette moved in the window...and I must have caught her eye. My heart froze - I wanted to run away, but I was stuck there. She pulled back the curtain and opened the window...

"Howie? What are you doing out there?"

"I was just walking by..."

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

The window closed. The light went off.

I put my head down and hurried off feeling like I was going to throw up and scream and cry all at the same time.

Down on the main drag I got sucked into a pub. The bar was sticky and the smoke burned my eyes.

"You want a pint there, lad?"

"Just a lemonade please."

"Lemonade it is."

I'd never had a pint before, to tell you the truth. Back home, the tradition was for a dad to buy his son his first pint. But that didn't happen with me.

The lemonade was cool. I tried to keep a low profile. Choking back all the old stuff that was bubbling up in me. Trying to stop it from happening again.

A long-haired fellow got up on the stage with a guitar...his song rang through me for days to come...

**(Song by Moody Bear)**

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

Nobody wants me, even in my dreams.

I amount to nothing, even in my dreams.

I'm bat shit crazy, even in my dreams.