

Episode 6: The Church

It was Sunday morning and I remembered what Father Wheelan had told me.

“Lots of pretty girls there!”

So, despite the weariness of the past couple of days, I decided to attend church service that morning. There was, in fact, only one pretty girl I was interested in and I thought she might be there and that maybe I'd get a chance to talk to her. It was a bright cold fall morning and the town was quiet. I usually slept in as best I could on Sundays, and then had myself a walk along the pier, since I had the whole place to myself. Then I'd read for the afternoon and generally laze around.

I didn't really know what to expect at church. As I got closer and saw others on their way, it dawned on me that I was grossly underdressed. But I didn't really own many outfits, and I figured the Great Whaler probably wasn't so well-dressed back in his time so it shouldn't bother anyone that I was in pretty regular clothes myself.

I imagined everyone would be happy to see me and extra welcoming to have a new soul joining the congregation, but mostly no one spoke to me at all. I supposed it was just the holiness of the place and the day that stifled their enthusiasm at seeing me there.

I hadn't really ever had a good look at the church before since I'd only been in there during work hours, and I had to rush. But now I could really soak up the atmosphere. The building was like one long hallway with a bell tower up front. The hall, I learned later, was called the nave, which sounded like naval, I suppose because of the seafaring nature of our religion.

There was a choir singing and it was quite a nice song. I took the opportunity to get a closer look at the arches. This being an older church, the arches were, of

course, giant whale rib bones. I couldn't even imagine how big the whale must have been. And the bones, like all the old whale bones, glowed green. I went up to have a closer look and to my surprise, when I touched the bone, the glowing got much brighter. I pulled my finger back right away, since I didn't want to cause any trouble. But when I looked to the side, I saw that Travis was looking right at me. He walked over,

"Morning Howie. Fancy seeing you here."

"Morning Travis. I thought it was about time I started paying attention to the important things in life, if you know what I mean."

"I noticed when you touched the bone —"

"Oh I didn't mean any harm."

"It's just a bone, Howie. You can't hurt it."

Just then Mr. Greenwood walked by with Stormy. He gave me a little nod. Stormy glanced at me but quickly looked the other way. That made my stomach sink a bit...but maybe I'd have another chance later.

"Why don't you sit with Naomi and I."

I didn't really know what went on in a church service and was glad someone at least could be a bit of a lifeline. So I sat with Travis and Naomi. For whatever reason they sat all the way in the last pew. I saw the rest of everyone else come in. Not many milkmen. But I did see McMyrtle with his parents. They were sort of middling people who owned a dry goods store in town. They sat about halfway to the front. Inspector Pierce came in and that made me nervous after what had happened. He saw me and just gave a sneaky little wink. I'll have to tell later about what happened the other night on the dock.

Just before the service began, Mrs. Noseworthy hurried in and took one of the only places left - plopping herself down right in front of me. Her enormous head mostly blocked my view, so I had to keep shifting to see what was going on.

The choir stopped about then, and Father Wheelan walked out looking much more serene and divine than I'd ever seen him look before. Everyone got quiet and he began.

"Shipmates. Today, on the anniversary of that tragedy which still affects many of our local families, I will discuss The Merchant Bellarmine. Bellarmine, we recall, was a trader in the ancient world. He sailed the known seas and thus met our saviour. He also was the first to record an encounter with the great subaqueous enemy of the Falena.

Until he met The Whaler, Bellarmine, nearly alone among his kind, understood the degree to which he'd been living in sin. He was tormented with that demon of the deep night and day. It plagued his days and tormented his nights. Only after meeting The Whaler was he able to defeat the monster. And, more importantly, keep the beast from returning to his dreams and hounding his every step. And therein is a lesson for us.

"We hope to hide our secrets from the world, to bury them at sea, believing they will sink beneath the inky waves never to be seen again. But the Merchant assures us that those depths are the repository of every last sin we commit. They accumulate on the freezing bottom like oily black sludge that, with time, grows and writhes...and bit by bit, day by day and year by year, it grows. Until one day, its sickly yellow eyes open - and it shoots forth to tear at our livers and to strike down any sailor who loses his way in a storm. In these back days, when the Falena have forsaken us, The Boggiretch swarm over the sea bottom feeding on carrion and waiting for their time to strike. Recall: Only seven years past, before the shipyard, one of our fishing boats dragged one up in his trap. It killed three

men before the harpoons killed it. They're out there. They haunt my dreams as they must haunt all of yours.

There seems no hope now but in silent waiting and prayer for this darkness to pass. In the waiting time, know that there is a record of our sins built up for us - we cannot hide. We cannot escape. It grows and it watches. No matter how deep the sea into which we attempt to drown our secrets, they will all one day return for all to see. The sea will one day run dry and we will stand naked and face to face with the Boggiretch."

I was pretty tired, so kept drifting in and out of sleep while he told this fantastic tale. Staring at the back of Mrs. Noseworthy's head, the black ribbon in her gray hair seemed to change into a hideous Boggiretch swimming beneath the iron gray ocean.

- I sort of dreamed that the monster found Mr. Pyman's corpse and was eating him...

And my mind wandered to the other night - the police had dumped Mr. Pyman into the ocean to hide his body.

I sneezed when one of those damned birds landed behind me.

They walked over...

"What do we have here?"

"A bloody snooper."

"I wasn't snooping - I was... passed out. Drunk! I was in the pub and got lost on my home and just fell over here. That's what happened."

"I know you. You were at Mrs. Hertle's house today looking for Inspector Piercey."

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And what did you want to talk to him about, then?”

I’d gotten up and to my surprise, both of the policemen put their arms in mine and we started walking along the pier. They were holding me a bit tighter than was strictly necessary in my opinion, but we seemed to be getting along well despite the circumstances.

“What did I want to talk to him about? Well, I told him that I’d always wanted to join the police force. The milkmen are great. But I always had such respect for you bobbies.”

“Wanted to join the force, eh?”

“Bright boy like you? You’d go far...wouldn’t he go far, Timmy?”

“Oh there’s a bright future for this one.”

Now, I’m not really the nervous type. But something in their tone was making me a bit skittish.

Then they ‘walked’ me close to the edge of the pier...

“How bout we give you a few pointers?”

And I sort of saw out of the corner of my eye that the tall one was inching his nightstick out of his belt.

It occurred to me that they hadn’t believed my story and were plotting to do away with me like they’d done with Pyman.

But I wasn’t about to let that happen. And just to let you know - I didn’t really have any intention or interest in becoming a police officer.

So all of a sudden I yanked myself free from their grip and spun around. My back to the water.

They both stepped back - and drew their nightsticks.

“Listen guys - I won’t say a thing if you let me go.”

But they were advancing on me. Not saying a word. The clouds parted, and the whole pier was bathed in crimson from the red moon.

I was getting really scared. Would anyone really care if I disappeared?

“Guys - don’t —”

But then the fat fucker hit me! On the arm I raised to protect my head!
It hurt like hell.

These cops were really trying to kill me!

Was I allowed to fight back? I didn’t even know.

The fat one fainted and I put my arms up again - but then the tall one smashed me right in the head.

I sank down to my knees - I had a hard time, but I got back up. They closed on me again...

But now I wasn’t scared. I was —MAD. I felt all the rage of HELL rise up in me and I heard an angel’s choir - deafening -

I looked at these two jerks and for the first time in my life - I knew I was in control. I heard water - pouring - like a great sunken ship rising from the ocean -

I raised my arms over my head...it was like I was giving them a taste of my nightmares -

I felt...power like I'd never felt before -
I saw the cops look up - white as ghosts with terror...
And they ran off ...

It was so bizarre - I turned around, and nearly fainted when I saw — —

And then Travis elbowed me - I heard the tail end of a snore - and realized it was coming from me.

Wheelan was still talking away up there. But I guess he'd moved on to more current affairs while I'd been dozing. He was red in the face now and it looked like he was really warming to his subject.

"We've had the iron fences of our houses cut away for the war effort. A lot of us have even given up pots and pans. We've all had to tighten our belts. Make do with less."

I was puzzled by what Father Wheelan's said. As someone who grew up in Mingsbight and through several years of war in the capital, I could say with confidence that this island seemed almost completely untouched by the turmoil on the mainland. But when I looked around, I saw a lot of nodding heads and serious faces. Was I missing something?

"“And on this, the tenth anniversary of our declaration of war against our Northern neighbour, the republic of Weyland, I believe it is my duty to remind us of the reasons we are fighting.

“On the surface, this conflict is about metal. With our the iron ore in our mountains exhausted, and without possibility of safely mining below ground, our great nation of Tow Law stood to lose its preeminent place in the world. Both economically and militarily, our enemies abroad sensed our weakness and began to move against us. And when it came time to ask for aid from our northern

neighbor, they flatly refused, leaving us no choice but to take what we needed for our survival by force. For it is a precept of our faith, as well as of human nature, that one may do what is necessary for self-defence.

But another law of nature, recognized by all men in all times, is the law of gratitude. And, beyond the practical matter of our lack of metal, it is the ingratitude of our former northern colony that we seek, rightly, to punish with all our might.

Never forget that we expended enormous resources to civilize the northern barbarian. We gave him our laws, our language, our roads and system of government. And when we requested aid from this nation, a nation mostly devoid of civilized human habitation and rich in untapped resources, we were soundly rebuffed. Weyland may have gained her independence from the mother country, which we always expected she would, when she reached a certain level of maturity. But the ingratitude they have shown to us, her parent for all intents and purposes, is as inexcusable as a child's slap to his mother's face.

Their claims of the sanctity and holiness of their mountains are simply lies, at most the holdover of some forgotten heathen religion they bandy about when convenient - since they do in fact procure ore for the guns and ammunition they use against our people.

And never forget the wiliness of our foe. Within a year of our declaration of war, and against all rules of decency, Weyland moved her troops secretly far south of the border by sea, and captured a part of our capital Mingsbight."

At this my mind wandered away from the old preacher...and I remembered...

I remembered being a lad back in Mingsbight. I used to play in the school yard by the gasworks...we lived in that narrow lane. Then the soldiers installed themselves - right in the school yard.

There was fighting when some enemy soldiers took over part of the town. Just the outskirts. A school in the next district got bombed and a bunch of the kids who'd survived were sent to our school and they told us all about it. It was about the most exciting thing that had ever happened. There were roadblocks and no

one could go to the part of town the Weylanders had annexed. We heard gunfire and saw billowing smoke from the big guns. I'll never forget the smell of burning.

Me and some of my friends decided to go on a mission to see the bombed out school on the other side of the barricades. It was going to be a great adventure. I got my rope and a compass I'd gotten as a gift. And after school, we all gathered in the yard, reviewing our equipment, and were about to set off. I told them - I want to be first over the wall. Let's wait until dark.

[A girl's voice in the background] "Don't let Howie come...He's so weird."

But then I remembered that my mother wanted me home for dinner. So off I went home in the gloaming as the gaslights came on.

I missed the adventure, but I thought it was an important thing to be a dutiful son.

Howie's mother: "Oh Howie, your father's working late. There's still some macaroni from last night and a butter tart. I'm going out for a bit."

But that was fine. I had my dinner and flipped through my comic book, "Kid Eliza: Detective Extraordinaire" My favourite of those comics was the one where Eliza is on summer vacation at her family cottage at the lakes. All the fish were missing so none of the kids could go fishing with their dads, and she had to find the fish thief, who turned out to be the crotchety old widow Merle who hated all the noise kids made going out in their boats in the mornings. It wasn't as sophisticated as the grown up serials. But Eliza had always been there for me as far back as I could remember...

And then I woke up...Father Wheelan was done, I supposed, and everyone was getting up to leave. I got up too and walked out with Travis and Naomi. We had to sort of wait in line to get out, which seemed odd to me. But then I saw that

everyone was filing past Father Wheelan - he stood outside and said a few words to everyone.

Stormy and Mr. Greenwood were a few people ahead and I craned my head to see if she'd notice me..but she didn't turn around. Mr. Greenwood was looking really animated talking to the man in front of him. I caught one little snippet of what he said.

“ - No boat took him - “

She got to Father Wheelan and I was surprised to see him lean over and give her a little kiss right on the mouth. She looked a little put off...I couldn't hear what he said to her, but after a few words she walked down the stairs into the street.

We moved along in the line...

And then my heart sank when I saw McMyrtle, who was already outside, run up to Stormy. She said a farewell to Mr. Greenwood, and Stormy and McMyrtle walked off together...I caught a glimpse of her smile and felt like I might throw up.

But then it was our turn.

Father Wheelan leaned in to kiss Naomi - I learned later this he did this with every young woman - but Naomi managed to dodge him. She grabbed his hand and stepped back, making it impossible for him to get a peck in without looking ridiculous. It was impressive really.

“You live alone, don't you, Howie?...Howie?”

I was distracted...

“I do, yes.”

“Why don’t you come back with us for a proper Sunday dinner? We’ve got more than enough. It’s good to have a home cooked meal sometimes.”

I agreed and we took the coast road out to his place. Naomi skipped along... she was a few years younger than me. I thought it would be polite to strike up a conversation with her, even though I didn’t really know how to talk to young people. She was throwing stones into the ocean as we walked.

“So how are you liking school, Naomi?”

“I’m the smartest one in my class. Right, dad?”

“It’s not nice to say those things to others, lass.”

She looked right at me.

“Well, it’s true anyways.”

“That’s wonderful. I was never so great in school myself....So where’s your mother at, Naomi? I never see her.”

For a split second she froze, and I thought I saw Travis wince a bit...but then Naomi just kept going like I hadn’t asked a thing.

“Dad says you found my gargoyle a while back and ended up in the water because you were so scared.”

“Naomi...”

“Oh...well...yes...something like that.”

“Dad says he thinks you’re —”

“Naomi!”

“Aren’t you going to tell him?”

“Just drop it, lass.”

I had no idea what they were talking about. But when we got to the cottage, they made me a cup of tea and I sat out on the porch while they got the rest of the dinner together.

It was cool out, but I sipped the tea and that kept me warm. I looked out over the water. I felt myself relax in the first time in I don’t know how long. If I could ever just have a place like this to sit and while away the hours, I’d be the happiest man alive. Travis was a lucky man to have this spot. I imagined myself sitting here afternoons with Stormy inside cooking and maybe a kid playing with blocks on the porch at my feet.

And then I remembered...what was that bastard McMyrtle doing with Stormy?

I got up and went inside to ask if they needed any help. But they were pretty much done and what a spread it was. It smelled wonderful - chowder, fish, pastries I didn’t know the name of. Fruit and I saw there was a gingerbread cake for after...

I didn’t know if I felt right accepting this kind of hospitality.

“It’s too much!”

“Nonsense, Howie. We don’t eat like this everyday, you know.

A few mouthfuls into the meal (and I have to admit I was eating a fair bit quicker than the others) I burst out,

“This is the best meal I’ve ever had!” And really, it wasn’t an exaggeration.

“Thank you very much for coming Howie. It’s good to have some company.”

“The people in town hardly ever want to talk us.”

“No? And why not?”

“They think dad and I are weirdos.”

“Well...we don’t see eye to eye on some religious matters.”

“But you go to church.”

“We do.”

“Dad says he’s the only one who actually knows anything about religion on the island and that includes Father Wheelan.”

“We’ll not discuss religion at the table, Naomi.”

That was fine with me and I concentrated on the meal.

Afterwards, when the sun was setting, I sat out on the porch again with Travis. He smoked a pipe in his quiet way and looked out across the ocean. Naomi did the dishes inside.

“Naomi was right, you know. My views on religion...let’s say, they’re old fashioned.”

I didn’t say anything since I really wasn’t interested at all in religion.

“Do you know what a Seeker is, Howie?”

"I don't think I do, no."

"You know about the Falena?"

"Sure, the whales with the glowing bones..."

"The Seekers are the ones who catch them."

"Right. But the Falena are gone, I thought. So no one catches them any more."

He thought about this a bit.

"What does your father do, Howie?"

This was a bit of a slap in the face...

"He was...He's a carpenter."

"Ah."

Then we sat there in silence for a while. It was getting dark.

"Come have a look at something, Howie."

We got up and went to the boat shed. He lit a lamp inside and there was a beautiful fishing skiff.

"Haven't been able to get out in her as much as I'd like. Just enough for Sunday dinners."

"I really appreciate the invitation, Travis."

“No problem. You know. Howie, there’s more to Seekers than just catching Falena. The Falena, you see...they’re not entirely of this world. They live...in between. And Seekers...they also live...in between.”

“That sounds awfully strange.”

He ran his hands over the skiff...admiring its lines.

“It is...they often see things no one else does. It makes them...sometimes others don’t really understand what they’re going through and don’t always want to associate with them. Do you see what I mean, Howie?”

“That does sound pretty strange.”

“There aren’t many Seekers around anymore. Most people don’t believe they exist at all. And when they recognize each other, they’ve got to stick together.”

I was getting pretty tired, to tell the truth, not having slept much the past couple of days.

“That is very interesting. I’m really not up on my knowledge of these things. But to tell the truth, Travis, and I don’t mean to be rude. But I do have to get up very early for work...and it is a bit of a hike back to town.”

He gave a deep, warm smile. His eyes seemed sad to me all of a sudden.

“Of course, Howie. You run along. I hope you’ll join us again some time.”

“I’d love to. The food was just amazing. And tell Naomi goodbye for me.”

Out on the coast road, it was a clear night. I looked up at the red stars...the white and red moons on opposite sides of the horizon. It was quiet but for the

waves lapping on the shore. It was almost like time slowed down for a minute and this very solemn feeling washed over me. Looking up at the vault of the sky, I somehow felt like I was still in church.