

Episode 8: The Dream

I looked out the window...it was still dark. And I saw someone in a long black coat. He was staring up at me, but I couldn't really see his face. There was a boat motor in the distance. Probably the noise had woken me up. I just kept looking at him, and he just kept looking back at me. I threw on my uniform and ran outside, but he was gone. It was creepy. But what was even stranger...all those birds. The dead ones. They were all perched along the pier...They weren't making any noise. I thought they were watching me...One took off and flew out over the sea. Then the rest followed. I just stood and watched them fly into the red sunrise until they disappeared. Somehow I knew... they wouldn't be back.

"Did anything else happen? Or was that the whole dream?"

"Oh, that wasn't a dream. That was this morning."

"Are you sure that really happened? Sometime we can have what are called waking dreams. Especially early in the morning or late at night."

"Sure I'm sure. I've been up ever since. "

He had me lying on a couch. He said this was a new medical procedure he just learned about where he'd ask me questions and get me to remember things...and then, he said, once we'd figured out the root of my problems, they would just unravel like a knot being untied. He wasn't charging me anything, and his couch was actually more comfortable than my bed at home. And if he could figure out why I had these spells, all the better.

""Dead birds, Howie?"

"Sure. You must have seen them, or at least heard about them, right? They've been bothering people in town for weeks."

He looked pretty sceptical.

“I did hear stories. But I didn’t put much stock in them.”

Now it was my turn to be sceptical.

“But the police spent an afternoon trying to shoot them. You mean you don’t believe they existed? What I tell you is protected by client patient privilege, right?”

“Yes...something like that.”

“Well, I ‘ll tell you something I didn’t tell anyone before. I actually found a small sinkhole in the parking lot of the milk receiving station. I kind of picked at it a bit...and...well, that’s where those birds came from. They all came flying out at me...you don’t believe me?”

He gave me a sort of condescending look, took a big breath, like he was about to expound on something really important.

“The leading theory in the medical community is that these...stories...visions...are a kind of culturally determined hallucination. There’s no question that there are creatures that we don’t understand living underground, and that they’re dangerous. So dangerous that we don’t dare dig very deeply. But just because we don’t understand these creatures, doesn’t mean they’re...monsters...or spirits. Even if a whole society is convinced otherwise. There’s no such thing as ghosts, Howie. And that includes the ghosts of dead birds.”

I was really surprised at what he’d said, and was thinking about how to respond. But it turned out he didn’t really want me to respond. He just changed the subject like the matter was closed.

"Why don't you tell me about any dreams you remember."

"Well, doctor, I don't usually remember my dreams."

"But you told me you were plagued by visions."

"The episodes...but...I think those really happen. I sometimes come to with bruises. I chipped a tooth not too long ago. And look."

I pulled up my pant leg and showed him where the dog bit me. It was mostly healed up - but it looked awful. The doctor looked concerned.

"You should have let me look at that after it happened, Howie."

As if I could afford to go see the doctor every time I got a cut.

"And you should report any strays to the police. Especially if they're dangerous."

"It's okay. He was only after me. And I killed him. I think."

He pursed his lips. I don't think he was taking me seriously.

"Well, why don't you tell me about one of your episodes."

So I told him about the other night, when it seemed like I fell into the ocean... and it was an ocean of blood...and I came out and saw my father, and we walked through the apple orchard. I told him how my dad disappeared and the trees turned black and tried to grab me.

Dr. Barrett thought about this and wrote some notes.

Then he began.

“The new theory developed by Dr. Vankelhoffen and his followers, is that these very powerful dreams are in fact wishes. In those terms, your dream is quite straightforward. You wish your dad was dead.”

I jumped at this.

“No I don’t! Why would I wish that?”

“I don’t know, Howie.”

“Then why did I dream the trees were attacking me?”

He thought another second.

“You wish to be punished for wanting your father dead.”

...

This line of thinking frightened me. But Dr. Barrett didn’t actually know anything.

“So it’s all in my head then? It’s not real?”

“I’m afraid so, Howie. Your dreams are just a window into the subterranean part of your soul. Nothing more.”

He turned off the phonograph at this point. Which was a relief. Dr. Barrett loved all the things that came from Brigus: Dr. Vankelhoffen’s new dream theories, and all the weird tuneless music they were making over there. I guess

the doctor wished he could go live it up in Brigus, but instead he was on St. Gaff's taking care of the likes of me. I felt bad for him.

About the same time, there was some kind of commotion outside the doctor's house. We heard a cry for help and Dr. Barret ran to the front door. I got up more slowly, since I'd been lying down for a while now.

When I got to the front room, I was completely shocked to see Mr. And Mrs. Mullen dragging McMyrtle, unconscious it seemed, into the house.

"We found him like this!"

"Passed out by the rubbish heap."

Now the rubbish heap was on the edge of town.

"Help me get him on the table!" The doctor said. The three of them hoisted Albert up. He seemed to be a rather heavy fellow, despite how lanky he looked. Maybe it's because he was so completely limp.

"Howie! Some help, please!?" The doctor shouted at me.

I grabbed McMyrtle's arm and we got him up. It had been two or three days he'd been missing. It caused a lot of problems down at the station since the rest of us milkmen had to cover his route - and we had to help the police look for him. At least we wouldn't have to scour the outskirts of town anymore.

The doctor got a candle and opened McMyrtle's eyes.

"The pupils are dilating. He's not dead."

Now that I got a better look, McMyrtle was really pale and awful looking.

“We don’t know how long he’d been there. We tried to talk to Morley...but you know how he is.”

Old Morley was the one who took care of the town dump. But he wasn’t very good at his job. He always talked about how he was writing a great tome of a book about the orbits of the moons and he shouted at anyone who requested that he do his job and dispose of some of the trash mountain piled up outside his shack.

“He’s apoplectic. Severely dehydrated. Malnourished. I’ll have to feed him with a tube.”

The doctor was rooting around in his cabinet. Looking for a tube, I suppose. When he’d found what he was looking for, he ran into the kitchen.

“Damn it! Nothing here”

Then he came running back in.

“Howie! Go down and get me a bottle of milk! Quickly! I don’t think he’s got much time.”

“Sure thing, Doctor!”

The doctor’s place was only a couple of blocks over from the milk station. On the way, I was thinking about what the doctor had said. Was it possible that my spells were just in my head? If that were true, I wouldn’t have to worry about them so much. But really I wasn’t convinced.

Billy was looking particularly cheerful in the red afternoon sun when I got to the station. I tipped my hat to him and went in.

Beaver was the only one still there.

“Corwin wants to see you.” He said.

I couldn’t imagine what he wanted me for, but I went over to his office and knocked on the door.

“It’s Howie!”

“Come in!”

I went in. It was always dark in Corwin’s office - he had the curtains drawn all the time. Wood panels...a small gaslamp on his desk.

“Have a seat, Howie. You’ve been doing a job for us. Don’t think it’s going unnoticed.”

I felt a warm glow spread over me as I sat in one of the red leather chairs.

“I don’t mind telling you that I’m seriously considering you for a red badge. We’re unexpectedly shorthanded, as you know. And war is good for promotion. More importantly...it’s very difficult to find someone...like you.”

Now the warm glow felt even warmer.

“We protect our own, Howie. Becoming a milkman. And I mean a real milkman, means you’re part of a brotherhood that extends far beyond the shores of this island. It’s a lifetime commitment. Do you have any family, Howie?”

“Well...none to really speak of, no.”

“Good...good.”

"I'd like you to be here tonight around midnight. In uniform."

"Yes sir!"

"Also. The situation with the police has escalated. It's a nuisance more than anything. But it's a nuisance we have to take care of. I need you to tell me who might be speaking to the police about you."

I furrowed my brows and told him I'd work on thinking about it. I was about halfway home when I stopped in my tracks. I was so excited about what Corwin had said, I'd forgotten to tell him about McMyrtle. And then I remembered that I was supposed to get milk for him!

I'd completely forgotten to tell him about McMyrtle. And I'd also forgotten to get milk for him. I ran back to the station, but it was closed. I ran back to the doctor's.

"Howie! Where have you been?"

"The station was closed...I went door to door asking for milk...but no luck."

From the look on his face, I didn't think he believed me.

I could see that Dr. Barrett already had a milk bottle upended on some contraption and that it was dripping into a tube going into McMyrtle's mouth.

"Luckily the neighbour had some."

The Mullens were gone.

"It's okay, Howie, you can go. I'll do my best with him."

Having done my good deed for the day, I made my way to the druggist's. I'd been meeting with Stormy there the past couple of afternoons and now it was like a standing date. We decided not to tell anyone about what happened to McMyrtle. People might get the wrong idea. And, as Stormy said, he did go down there with an act of his own free will.

I went in, and there was the usual crowd. Stormy and her friend Molly were at the bar.

"Hi Howie!" Stormy said.

"You'll never guess where I just was."

"Where?"

"At Dr. Barrett's. The Mullens found McMyrtle. He was passed out in the dump. Nearly dead. The doctor needed my help to save him. It was hard work, but we got him stabilized. He looks awful. All pale and haggard."

The girls were wide-eyed.

"Can we go see him?"

"The doctor said McMyrtle needs his space for at least a few days. He wants me to check in because, like I said, he needs my help. But it's best if no one else goes there."

"Did Albert say what happened to him?" Molly asked.

Stormy and I gave each other a secret look.

"He was passed out - paraplectic, I think the doctor said."

"Wow." Molly said.

"I got the new issue of Eliza," Stormy said. "We can read it together later!"

She handed it to me. It was a picture of Eliza in a deep dark jungle - a machete in her hand.

Just then Ryan, a milkman about my age walked by.

"You read Eliza Pike? She's for girls."

"No he's not." Stormy said.

Ryan huffed and walked off.

"Some people don't know anything. I have to go to the ladies room."

When Stormy was gone, Molly leaned over to me.

"Do you want some advice? You should kiss her."

"I'll kiss her when the time is right."

Molly looked sceptical.

Later, we were all talking when Naomi came in. She didn't hang around with the rest of everyone else. She just went to the pharmacist, Mr. Goucher, and was getting some kind of medicine.

"She's so weird. Always dressed like a fisherman." Stormy said.

Naomi saw me and waved. And I waved back.

"You know her?"

“Sure, she’s on my route. Us milkmen get to know everyone.”

Later, Stormy and I were walking downtown. It was late in the afternoon. I was supposed to be walking her home, but we just ended up walking all over town...I told her my dreams about the future...and she told me about hers...and I think we were both trying to shape them so they’d run together. She said I should go with her one weekend up to Skaw, where her aunt lived...we could sneak into the lighthouse, she said...

We were getting close to the pub I went to a while back, O’Heathers. I mention it because we saw Inspector Piercey walking towards us from the direction of the pub. And he wasn’t walking very steadily. He saw me and made a jagged sort of beeline for us. Stormy leaned in and held my hand and I could tell he was already making her nervous.

“Hey there Howie. You’re in for it now, Boy-o. You thought we were done with you, hey?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll see!”

And with that he staggered off down the road. Stormy and I were still holding hands and they were so warm and sweaty.

“What was that all about?”

I puffed out my chest and tried to look like a ruffian.

“The coppers are always harassing me. They know they can’t boss me around, on account of me being from a rough part of Mingsbight. I don’t take any guff from ‘em. He ain’t got nothing on me.”

With that, Stormy pinned me to the wall of a shop -

All of a sudden, I felt like the world disappeared and I was floating and warm and dizzy - like I'd gone to heaven.

It took me a bit before I realized she was kissing me. I could feel her tongue and smell her hair with some strawberry or vanilla perfume...

We were holding each others hands...fingers interlaced...and I could have stayed like that forever...

"Milk 'er for all she's worth, milkman!"

We were right beside the bar, and I guess some guys had come out and saw us...

Stormy and I opened our eyes and we looked at each other right up close. I'd never noticed just how green and pretty her eyes were. We didn't look at whoever made the comment. We just giggled and kept walking...hand in hand... And I don't think I'd ever been so happy in my entire life. I'd never kissed anyone before.

After more waking, and a couple more kisses, we got to her house. One last kiss.

"Good night, Howie."

"Goodnight, Stormy."

I stepped down from her porch...it was dark now.

And there...standing in the middle of the road - was the man in the long dark coat. He was watching me. I couldn't see his face at all.

I started walking home and I could tell he was following me. I didn't really feel like being home alone with this strange person on my tail. I still had my uniform on, so I just went early to the milk station.

When I was within Billy's reassuring gaze, I felt safer. I knocked on the door. Frank was inside. No one else was there yet. It was still a few hours until midnight.

"Hey young fella. You're a real keener aren't you?"

"Listen, Frank. I think someone's been following me."

Frank was usually pretty easy going and joked a lot. But you could tell you didn't want to cross him. He was a big guy. When I told him about being followed, he got really serious.

"Where?"

"I don't know where he is now. I saw him outside my window this morning, and then on the street when I was coming here. He just keeps staring at me."

"All right, let's go."

We left the milk station and looked around. We walked around for a while, but didn't see the man again. Frank was getting less tense.

"I think he's gone. Let's head back. Actually. You had any dinner?"

We got sandwiches and just sat around chatting. I told him about Stormy...

"Good job, buddy!"

It was getting close to midnight when he said,

"Listen, Howie. Tonight we're just checking in on the old girl, okay? So nothing too crazy. But since it's your first time...you just hang back and don't do or say anything, okay?"

I didn't say anything. I must have looked a bit spooked.

"Hey - relax. You're with us. It'll all make sense eventually. Trust me."

We went outside and waited for Corwin to come out of his office. Beaver and Walker were there. And to my surprise, Ryan was there, too. He also looked nervous. We weren't really buddies or anything, so we didn't say anything to each other.

Frank went over to Corwin and said something quietly to him. They were both looking at me. I couldn't hear what Frank said, but I did hear Corwin.

"It's under control."

When it was time...We entered Corwin's office.

I knew it was totally illegal to be underground. No one was allowed to dig..let alone go exploring.

But I was with sworn officers of the department of lactic affairs...and they worked for the government. All the milk facilities were nationalized when I was a kid.

Corwin, Beaver and Frank put on great flowing robes in silence and lit lanterns. Then Corwin pulled back the curtains and I was surprised to see that instead of windows, there was a great wooden door. Corwin took a key out and unlocked the door...

Then we all filed into the darkness. They walked slowly - it was hard to see the ground as we went down a set of wooden steps. A very long set of stairs that still smelled of new lumber. They steps were wide - about five feet across...but there was no handrail and you couldn't see the bottom - or anything else for that matter. No walls... The lanterns lit us up, but nothing else. After a while, it was

like I couldn't make sense of what was up and what was down...I got dizzy...but if I just kept looking at the steps and nothing else, I was okay.

At the bottom, we walked out onto some gritty black sand or gravel...It was like being on a rough beach. We walked on - our feet sinking into the sand, which made it slow going. And there were rocks I tripped over in the dark. The others seemed to know the way, but I had no idea how. It was cold...there was no wind and the air was weirdly thin.

Still...I felt like I knew something about these underground places none of the others did. And it scared me.

We walked...I don't know how far...maybe it was only a few steps...but in the dark...creeping along, you couldn't tell. Even here, the lanterns hardly cast any light. I was shivering. It seemed like we were walking alongside a lake of black water...I felt dark green eyes peering out at me from the water. There was a barely visible grey glow coming from under the water...

And then I was aware of large objects - like trees....black, stretching up beyond the lantern light. Once we got to this forest type place, Corwin stopped.

I was at the end of the procession...

I started hearing whispers...my imagination, probably...it was almost like they were saying my name. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the red eyes of the doberman...but that was impossible. And I wouldn't have been able to say anything even if I'd wanted to.

Corwin's voice shattered the quiet -

"Mamifa."

He took a milk bottle out of his robe...it was glowing....green...
Somehow the air seemed warmer.

There were footsteps - something big was coming.

Then - several blood red eyes opened - a few feet above us -
And there was a deafening snort -

I opened my mouth to scream - and felt the blood drain from my face as I realized what I was seeing...I froze and stared - in the darkness it was hard to make out - huge muscled legs...it was on four legs and it loomed over us...

Corwin held up the milk bottle...the thing saw it...and lowered its head...glistening leathery skin..

A slobbering mouth opened and a gory tongue eased out...Corwin poured the contents of the milk bottle onto the lapping tongue...

It was huge - with two enormous horns...vaguely bovine...but with six eyes. It slurped up whatever kind of milk that was...

Corwin...I couldn't believe my eyes...went under the thing and ran his hands over what must have been its belly...

"It's not time yet."

Then the thing turned its gaze to me...and it screamed...I don't know if you've ever heard a cow scream....but this was much much worse...It took a step towards me - thrusting it's awful head at me.

I couldn't stand it any more and ran...in the black...I fell - scraping my leg on a rock...I tried to run back the way we'd come, but it the pitch I couldn't tell. Frank, holding a lantern, ran after me...

"Howie! Stop!"

"It saw me!"

I followed the shore, if that's what it was...and found the stairs...thanks mostly to Frank's lantern...But Frank stayed at the bottom and I ran stumbling back up the stairs.

I got to Corwin's office and didn't stop - I ran outside and there was a heavy rain. - Thunder.

But it felt better to be here...I was getting soaked walking home...then someone riddled up to me with an umbrella - Mr. Florsham.

"Howie! What's wrong, lad? You're having a night terror - wake up, Howie!"
"I'm awake...just had to get outside for a minute."

He looked suspiciously at me...glanced down at my leg.

"Uniform's torn. You wear your uniform to bed, Howie?"
"I haven't been home yet."

"Ah. Let's duck under here."

We got under the awning of a shop...I was shivering with cold again. Mr. Florsham had a heavy coat on.

"You need an umbrella if you're going to walk in this weather, son."

"Oh, I just forgot...I don't have one."

"I see. He looked closely at me. How's the bite?"
"The bite?"

"A dog bit you. You showed me, remember?"
I did not remember.

“You’re getting to be quite the nighthawk. Just like me.”

I’d more or less caught my breath by this point...and hadn’t really been following what he was talking about.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Howie. But...maybe you need some help. With your nights. To sleep better.”

And then it dawned on me - It was Florsham. He’d seen me. It was him who was talking to the police...