

10. The Trip

I was about to pour this lumpy, milky-brown concoction down the old professor's throat. Beaver was holding the old guy in the chair and Frank had his mouth open. One hand on the upper jaw, one on the lower.

Everyone's eyes were on me and I could hardly get my legs moving. Professor Florsham was struggling, but between Frank and Beaver, he couldn't move. When I got really close I tilted the bottle a bit...but I couldn't get my hands to actually pour the stuff into his mouth. Frank was staring hard at me - "Do it" He said under his breath. With all my will I pushed forward - and sort of fumbled the bottle. It's like time slowed down. The bottle was about to fall. Frank instinctively shot his arm out to grab it. I grabbed it too, and between us, we almost dropped the bottle again. Meanwhile, with only one hand holding Florsham's jaw open, the old professor bit down on Frank's hand. Frank yelled...

"God Damn It!"

When I had the bottle securely in my hand, Frank punched Florsham in the face really hard. He was disoriented for a second and his mouth fell open. And really fast, Frank grabbed my hand and we stuffed the bottle in Florsham's mouth. I'm sorry to say, because it was pretty gruesome, but we actually knocked a few of his teeth out in the process...Florsham was choking on blood and the milky concoction...I was shaking, but couldn't move...Florsham got a bunch of the milk down and Frank, Beaver and I all let him go.

He fell to the floor...twitching and writhing. It was really the most horrible thing I'd ever watched.

I felt like I was going to throw up...but also like I was sinking through the floor. It was as if the lights got really dim...and as Florsham stopped moving around so much, I saw....It was like a thousand little hands reaching up through the floor and sucking him dry like an old prune. And then I think I blacked out for a second, because Frank suddenly had both his arms under mine and I was leaning back on him. Corwin was standing now and hovering over me. I looked up at him and put on a serious looking face.

"I did it," I said. "I really did it."

But Corwin raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips. "Hmmm." He said. "Get to the station and bring a truck here. Park it outside." Corwin said.

I looked one more time at the old professor...the gaping hole of his mouth all red with white frothy stuff seeping out...and the dead eyes - the whites of his eyes were a weird green colour now...my stomach convulsed and I threw up a bit on the carpet. Corwin jumped back, obviously disgusted with me.

"Get moving."

I got out as fast as I could, wiping my mouth with my sleeve. And then wiping my sleeve on my pants because it looked pretty bad. I tried hard to get my breath under control as I walked. But I really couldn't stop shaking.

I had to cut across downtown to get to the station from Florsham's house. It was Friday night, and a lot of younger people were out and about.

I was walking down the main street in a daze when I heard...

"Howie!"

I turned and there was Stormy with Molly and two guys I'd never seen before. Stormy was running towards me. She gave me a big kiss on the cheek, which I probably should have reciprocated...

"Hi Stormy..."

"What are you up to? This is Rick and Leo - from high school."

"Hi...I'm just getting a truck..."

“What for?”

“Just...in case I wanted to go anywhere...”

“Really? Let’s go to my aunt’s this weekend! With your truck it’ll be so much better than the omnibus!”

“I’m not sure...” I said

“Can I come, too?” Molly piped up.

Stormy rubbed her hand on my chest.

“I was thinking it would be just the two of us!”

“Ohhh!” They all said...

“So? Can we do it?”

“Sure...we’ll go for a drive.”

“Okay, I’ll come meet you in the morning!”

Then Leo got an idea, “Why don’t we go with you now and we all drive around town in the milk truck!”

“No...No, I have to...take care of something...and I’m pretty tired...”

“He gets up really early for work. And he’s up for a promotion.”

“That’s right...but I’ve got to go...”

I kept trying to keep my arm with the puke on it behind my back so no one would see.

I gave Stormy a bit of a hug and wandered off...I could hardly focus on whatever they were talking about...

[In the background] "He's just tired"

Later, I parked the truck in front of Florsham's house and knocked on the door.

Beaver opened.

"Where have you been? And what are you doing knocking? Get in here."

I didn't really want to go back in, but what could I do? Inside, Corwin was gone, but Frank and Beaver had wrapped the professor up in the living room rug and tied it up with some string. Frank was sitting in Florsham's chair sipping what I assumed was Florsham's whiskey. He held up the glass when he saw me.

"This guy knew his whiskey...Alright, Howie. Let's get him onto the truck."

So we dragged him onto the truck. As he were carrying him down the steps, a lady in the house next door came out with a watering can - even though it was pretty late at night. She looked over at us with this alarmed look on her face.

"Get back inside, you." Beaver hissed. And back in she went, looking pretty scared too.

So on the truck Florsham went. I hopped in the cab and Frank came up to the window.

“Just drive a few miles out of town and bury him. The ground’s not too bad for digging a few miles north of here. Make sure the hole’s a few feet deep and not close to the road. The truck should be able to go off road far enough to get where you need to go. If you get going now, you should be able to get back before the sun’s up and no one’ll be the wiser.”

Then he grabbed my shoulder through the window.

“Do a good job with this. Corwin’s gonna be impressed.”

So off I drove. And almost right away I nodded off. I figured the smartest thing to do would be to get an hour or two of sleep before going off to bury Florsham. No one would interfere with a milk truck on the street.

So back home I went. I put down my head on the pillow and it felt like an instant later that there was a knocking on my door. I opened up my eyes and could see that it was early morning...I dragged myself to the door - I hadn’t taken off my uniform - and there was Stormy standing there with Mrs. Somertag, the landlady.

“I hope it’s alright, Howie, she said she was a friend of yours.”

“Of course, thank you. Come in!” I said to Stormy.

I had a moment of panic - I’d slept in. The body was still in the truck and I was supposed to go away with Stormy...

[Back in the room.]

“Do you sleep in your uniform?”

“No! I just...got so tired.”

She had a look at my place. It didn't take long since it was only the one room. I guess to her fancy eyes it looked a little rough around the edges with the old sausage wrappers and my mattress that was sort of sagging.

“Did you bring that from home?” She was looking at the whale painting on the wall.

“No, it came with the place. It was easier to rent out a furnished room, you know?”

“Sure. It's...small. Maybe we can find something better when you get promoted?”

“Oh sure. I didn't plan to live here forever!”

“Well....are you ready to go?”

“Oh...yes! Can you go wait in the hall and I'll get dressed?”

“Okay...”

“Or you wait here! I'll go to the bathroom down the hall and get changed. Here - look at my Eliza collection!”

I pulled out all my magazines from under the bedside table and grabbed my other clothes and left her there. I figured she'd be more comfortable in my room than in the hall. Especially since when I opened the door, Mrs. Somertag was still standing there. I think she might even have been listening.

“Howie - she seems like such a nice girl. But I want you to remember that this isn't a house of ill-repute. We don't want to be getting a poor reputation.”

“Of course, Mrs. We're just going away for a little trip and we'll be on our way shortly.”

“No sleepovers, okay?”

While I got dressed it occurred to me - I could just bury Florsham up north when Stormy was with her aunt. Problem solved!

When I went back to the room, Stormy was looking out the window.

“Who's that weird old woman hitting your truck?”

I rushed to the window, and sure enough, the old crone was whacking the truck with her stick.

“Let's go!” I said.

I rushed out the door with Stormy right behind me.

“Hey - get away from there!”

Now she was poking the rolled up rug with her stick!

She turned to me and grinned with that gummy half-toothless grin.

“Like a book...so much knowledge between the covers...” she mumbled.

I didn't really want her going on in that vein, so I just said, “Hop in, Stormy, let's get going.”

And off we drove in the early morning sun. The red moon just sinking over the sea.

I'd never been north of town. It was rocky, with bits of rocky land sticking out into the ocean like big claws. There were a few trees but they were all low and mossy. I guess the weather was too harsh for them to grow very high.

Both of us were silent...just enjoying the ride.

When the sun was up a bit higher, Stormy looked back.

"Why is there a rug in the truck?"

"The rug? It's just a rug...For Frank. One of the other milkmen. Someone on my route didn't want it and I remembered that Frank really wanted a rug for his place. So I picked it up...to surprise him. I just didn't get a chance to drop it off yet. Hope it doesn't rain..."

"You're a good friend, Howie. Loyal. Not like Albert."

"Not like Albert?"

"I was meaning to tell you...Albert told me, before the accident, obviously, that after Billings died, he found some papers beside him. He took them and looked. And they were about you. It said you were from county Buckle and not Mingsbight. I told him it was probably just some mistake, but he was really mad when Corwin made him spray for flies and you got to do that secret mission to the radio station. He said he was going to tell the police, because if you lied on your application, maybe they'd send you to the army, he said. He was really jealous of you."

That peckerhead...so it was McMyrtle who was talking to the police...I started to get this weird sinking feeling in my stomach as we drove.

I had to really work to keep the rage and shock off of my face.

"You okay?"

"Sure. Just...I think I swallowed a bug."

"Eww."

"You are from Mingsbight, right? Not Buckle."

"It's true...I lied on my application."

Stormy thought about this.

"Well. You were just looking out for yourself. I think that was smart."

We hit a big bump in the road, and there was a big thud as the carpet in the back got jostled around. And an empty milk canister fell over and making all sort of noise. Stormy looked back.

"The rug's really lumpy. Is there something inside?"

I felt myself blush.

"Oh, that's just some potatoes. A couple sacks of potatoes. Since I had the truck, I decided to get a bunch...Can you stay here a second? I just want to tie down the carpet. Just wait here, okay?"

So I pulled over and hopped out. I went around back. I got a bit lightheaded and really scared when I saw that the carpet had come undone a bit and you could see Florsham's feet in his professor's socks sticking out. I was busy stuffing them back in and trying to tighten up the strings - -

“Everything okay?”

I just about jumped out of my skin. Stormy was right behind me, but I didn't think she saw anything.

“Oh, yeah. Just securing this load back here.”

I hastily shoved the feet under the rug as best I could.

“I needed to stretch my legs!”

And when I turned around, she was actually stretching her legs. I was mesmerized.

No one was around on the road in either direction, so I walked over and kissed her...and I wanted to kiss her more, but she pulled away - “The day is young!” She said with a big smile on her face. We got back on the truck and kept going. I felt like we were settlers from yesteryear going off into unknown lands to forge a new start for ourselves. Stormy put her hand on my leg...its was warm and that warm feeling filled up my whole brain.

We passed through the town of Skaw. It was just a couple dozen houses and a few stores. A old stone church. An old couple of the street stopped and stared at us. Probably they'd never seen such a fancy truck before. We didn't stop.

As we went on, the trees got bigger...Spruce tress, Stormy said. And Stormy told me all about her aunt.

“She and my uncle got married pretty young and had a boy - my cousin, Patrick. My uncle had some kind of business with the woodcutters and he was pretty well-off. I don't remember him, really. Patrick, my cousin, was never quite right in the head. He used to love sneaking up on people and scaring them. Then one day, they found my uncle - he'd hanged himself from a tree in their yard. Some people in my family said that Patrick did it. But my aunt just told the

police he was upset about something, and if the family says it's suicide, they take the family's word for it. But after that, Patrick got worse...he would just follow my aunt around the house without saying anything. Or he'd jump out at her with a knife and just start laughing. Her nerves were shot, and she's still pretty jumpy."

"And where's Patrick now?"

"He just got a job as a wood cutter...I don't know where he lives now. He still visits my aunt sometimes. I've only met him like once or twice. But listen, we're getting pretty close. Turn down here."

So I turned down a wooded lane.

"Turn down there."

So I turned down another track - hardly a road. It obviously hadn't been used for a long time.

"There's an old shack down here that no one uses. Okay, just stop here."

So I stopped and we hopped out.

"You sure you'll be okay? I'm sorry I can't bring you up with me right away."

"Of course! I love the outdoors."

The plan was for Stormy to pretend she took the bus and got a ride up here from town. The lane to her aunt's place was 2 miles, so not too long a walk. I was supposed to leave the truck here where no one would see it. I was supposed to just wait here in the woods until it started getting dark. Then I'd sneak up to the guest house close to the aunt's place and Stormy would let me in.

It all seemed perfect. I'd get to spend the weekend up here with Stormy and I could bury Florsham on her aunt's property when everyone was asleep.

So Stormy gave me a big kiss and walked up the main lane.

And I stayed behind with the truck. And the rug. I told Stormy I'd be fine and tried to pretend I was a rugged woodsman. Even though, to tell you the truth, I'd never even been in the woods. And now that I was here alone...it was so quiet. It bothered me. I sat in the truck for a while, but it got pretty boring. Especially since, right in front of the truck, out the windshield, was this tree with a bog branch sticking straight out to the side. It looked like the perfect tree for a hanging someone and I couldn't stop thinking about Patrick and Stormy's poor old uncle getting hanged by his own son. I kept thinking about Patrick just standing there, watching his dad struggle...it was too awful. So I went for a walk. It was a bit cold out. And I was getting cold, too. I went to the end of the track...it was pretty overgrown. At the end, there was a red wooden shack, like Stormy said. There was a window, half-broken, and I could see a hole in the roof. I thought maybe I could go sit in there and warm up, but I was a bit afraid to just go in there.

I argued with myself - you're a man now, Howie. You can at least have a peek in the window.

So I looked in - I could see some glass bottles that looked pretty old and dusty lined up against the wall. A bunch of rusty springs that must've been a mattress.

There was a table with a couple of magazines on it.

I decided not to go in. Nowhere to sit.

I was walking back to the truck...but something was bothering me. A ringing started in my ears and I figured out what was bothering me. The magazine - I had the same one. The Tow Law Runner, with the Eliza Pike stories...it was from a couple of weeks ago. So the shack can't have been that abandoned.

I quickened my pace...but I heard something in the woods...probably a racoon, I thought...the sky was getting dark, but it was not even lunch...

And then there was a little boy in front of me, maybe 5 or 6. He was dressed in a blue knit sweater and he had new boots on...he just stared at me. I was frozen on the spot.

"Are you going to come back?" he asked. And I knew what he meant.
"No."

And he frowned...and looked sad...little tears welling up...
"Why not?"

I couldn't answer...

And the boy burst into tears and ran into the woods -

I ran after him. But he was gone. I kept looking for a bit - I saw him out of the corner of my eye - running. I chased, and he went down some stairs...it was like there'd been a building with a basement here. The building was gone, but the stairs and hand rail remained...covered in pine needles.

I didn't want to go down there, but my legs took me anyways...

It wasn't very deep...and there was a dim light from outside. A long corridor with shelves. My eyes got used to the light and I saw that the shelves were lined with skulls...some with bits of leathery skin still stuck on them... a few had sunken bits of brown matter that used to be eyes . I spun around to get out, but the corridor just kept going in both directions. Then I realized - I'd been hearing something for a while now...a violin...haunting...it sounded like home somehow and I followed the sound...

The corridor looked like it curved down as I walked...and it made me a bit dizzy...

Eventually I saw - a very tall man with a top hat. His back was to me, and he was playing a violin...walking away from me.

"Hey! Hey! Can you hear me?"

I ran to catch up, but he stayed ahead...even though he was just walking. I got dizzy...with all those skulls watching me...

And we came out onto the beach...he was playing for a whaling ship that was on fire a mile or so off the coast...I could feel the heat. I stood beside the violinist and we watched a mast fall, embers crashing everywhere.

The little boy came and stood beside us...

"The oil catches fire very easily," he said.

I looked down at him and he looked back up at me.

"You'll have to be more careful next time.

Then there was a dull crash...and the stern of the ship sank into the water...

Everything went black.

I got up and looked around. I was really horrified that I was in the middle of the woods and didn't know where I was at all. I thought back on everything I'd read about wilderness survival, but all that came to mind was that I should follow the sun. I noticed when Stormy and I arrived, the sun was sort of in front of us coming through the windshield. So I thought if I kept following the sun, I'd eventually come to the aunt's house at least. I was really cold, and it was getting to be late afternoon...I tried not to get too nervous. But I was shivering.

I walked and walked...there were a few clouds, but I could still figure out the right direction.

The birds in the trees seemed to be laughing at me...and I was getting really hungry. I eventually came to a big rock wall that I definitely hadn't seen before. I clambered up to get a good look around. But all I could see were trees...and, in the distance behind me, I could see the shore. It dawned on me that I might have been going the wrong way. The wind was picking up and now my hands were

numb...There was nothing else to do but start back...so I climbed down...and went back the way I came.

Without the sun in front of my, guiding my way, it was hard to know if I going the right way.

I started to try and think about what I would do if it got dark and I was still wandering around out here...I thought I could build a shelter by breaking some branches and leaning against a tree. Maybe I should start now while I can still see?

Can you freeze too death even if it's not quite freezing out? I was also thirsty. Would I die if I didn't get anything to drink until tomorrow?

The sun all of a sudden seemed to be setting really fast. Like it was playing a joke on me.

I found a little clearing. I grabbed a couple of branches with needles on them. I thought they'd be like blankets. There was a dead tree with some limbs that looked like they might work for a shelter. So I grabbed one - and yanked on it. But I couldn't get it to break. So I sort of kicked at it.

But I just ended up hurting my foot and falling. And the branch was still just sticking out of the tree there...

It was getting scary.

But then I heard something. Glasses clinking? Certainly something glass...

So I walked towards it...and, through the woods, I saw a big old wooden house and a small a little ways beyond it. This must be Stormy's aunt's place! I felt a lot better already.

I snuck over to the guest house. It was dark inside so I thought Stormy must not be done dinner yet. I sat on a rock a little behind the trees so no one could see me. I was really shaking uncontrollably now from the cold and everything else. I was so cold I thought maybe I should just go knock on the door and claim to be a lost traveller. But I was scared Stormy would be annoyed with me. So I jumped around to get warm. But it just made me colder...

But then - like the sound of heaven above, I heard the door of the aunt's place open and saw Stormy come out. She had a plate with wax paper on it. My dinner!

I stepped out from the trees when she got close.

"Hey!" I whispered.

"Hey - I've got your dinner!"

She opened the door and we went in. It was cold in there, but warmer than outside. Stormy lit a lamp and then looked at me - and raised her eyebrows.

"You're freezing! Oh poor guy! Were you just sitting there the whole time? I'm sorry."

"No, I went for a walk...just to look around."

She felt my hands and then looked actually nervous.

"I'm going to get some tea for you. There's wood there. Can you start a fire?"

And she left. I threw a bunch of logs and old paper in the iron stove...there were some matches...

It felt so good as the fire got going..

And then Stormy was back with the tea...I drank it and ate the roast and potatoes and bread she'd snuck out for me.

It was like being in heaven...

After eating, I was really tired...The guest house was one big room with a stove, a table and chair and a big bed. Stormy had a deck of cards and she showed me a game that involved trumps and a bunch of other rules. We joked and talked about all sorts of things. We might as well have been the only people

left on the earth...It was black outside and it felt so good to be in here with a fire...

Later, Stormy made me turn around while she put on a nightgown. When I turned around and saw her in it..my breath caught in my throat. I didn't really have any pyjamas, but she didn't mind me getting into bed in my regular clothes. It felt like we were grown ups with our own house and it was the most thrilling thing that had ever happened to me. She turned out the lamp, and we found each other's lips in the dark...I was overwhelmed...I ran my fingers through her hair and down her back...I might have been shaking a bit, not really knowing what to do...I put my hand under her night-gown...

Mm mm. She said. And I pulled my hand back and contented myself with kissing and holding her...

She smelled like bath powder and blue flowers...I knew I'd never forget it... We eventually fell asleep...

When I woke up, she was getting dressed...

"I have to go back to the house. We don't want her coming looking for me!"

"No, we don't."

"But you can sleep more...I'll come back with some breakfast in a while, okay?"

She left and I dozed a bit before remembering - I had a job to do.

I hopped up, pulled my shoes on and snuck out.

I walked down the lane, shivering in the morning cold...but walking on a lane was much less worrisome than walking aimlessly in the woods, so I was all

right. Although I did start to worry when I remember that I hadn't brought a shovel to dig a hole with. Maybe I could use a big stick.

But when I got to the truck - the rug was still there, but it was unfurled. I got really worried and ran over.

I took me a moment to figure out what I was looking at.

Parts of professor Florsham, ripped up and spread around. But only a few bits...and the rug was all bloody.

And then I figured it out. Animals must have gotten at him in the night and dragged the parts away.

I was just staring at his arm...the forearm bones exposed and tendons sticking out...when it hit me.

Now I wouldn't have to bury him.

This was turning out to be the best weekend of my life!